

NO BANNERS, NO BUGLES



Books by

EDWARD ELLSBERG

ON THE BOTTOM

PIGBOATS

S-54

HELL ON ICE

MEN UNDER THE SEA

CAPTAIN PAUL

UNDER THE RED SEA SUN

THIRTY FATHOMS DEEP

OCEAN GOLD

SPANISH INGOTS

TREASURE BELOW

“I HAVE JUST BEGUN TO FIGHT”

CRUISE OF THE *JEANNETTE*



NO BANNERS NO BUGLES

by

EDWARD ELLSBERG



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**FOR
MY DAUGHTER,
MARY ELLSBERG POLLARD**

NO BANNERS, NO BUGLES

C H A P T E R

1

IT WAS RATHER COLD ALONG THE shores of Algeria and Morocco that early morning of November 8, 1942, when "We came as friends" to the coasts of North Africa.

Along the shores of the Red Sea on the other side of Africa at that same moment, it was rather hotter—in fact it might have been called with no exaggeration infernally hot. There in the Red Sea, I was struggling that morning on the bottom of the ocean with an Italian naval mine apparently rigged inside a scuttled vessel as a booby trap to blow us all to hell if we dared to try to recover that sabotaged Italian ship.

In Massawa, stewing in the unbelievable heat of the Red Sea sun even in November, we had no illusions as to who our friends were. It was plain enough we had none, or we should never have been sent, war or no war, there to Massawa, the hottest spot on this earth, and then left forgotten till we were as thoroughly "cured" as desiccated fish beneath that inhuman Red Sea sun.

That Italian mine in the flooded forehold of the submerged *Brenta*, dimly visible to the heavily weighted diver who cautiously breasted his way about it on the sea floor, was not too much of a worry either to the diver on the bottom or to the rest of us on the surface just over him. He knew and we knew that one incautious contact with those deadly acid-filled leaden horns or the delicately balanced hydrostatic piston protruding from that steel, TNT-laden sphere which the Italians had evidently rigged out with loving care for our destruction, and we should all suddenly have our troubles ended together in a volcanic eruption of flame and water shooting us skyward.

Still we weren't too much concerned. Long months of torture in the blazing heat and incredible humidity of Massawa had left us apathetic and drained of hope of escape. If we succeeded in removing that mine from inside the sunken ship and its half ton of TNT without detonating it, we might then recover the precious *Brenta* for Allied use. If we didn't and we touched off that booby-trapped mine in the process, we should be the gainers anyway. In one flaming instant our sufferings would be ended instead of being excruciatingly drawn out minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, over still more agonized months till the flaming sun above us, as certainly but less mercifully, achieved the same result.

The diver, wiry little Buck Scougale, without ever having touched the mine, came up as instructed to report to me on the surface its description and what the Italians had done to it, so far as he could determine in the dim light of the ocean floor, and especially to its hydrostatic piston, to convert it to a booby trap for our destruction. After listening to his agitated account at some length, I called off all further diving on the *Brenta* and steamed back with my salvage crew to Massawa. There in the seclusion of my room ashore I might study more at leisure the blueprints (furnished me from Cairo by British Naval Intelligence) showing the normal workings of that death trap planted in the *Brenta*'s forehold, and figure what I might do, if anything, to outwit the Italians by removing the mine without exploding it.

Half-naked, soaked from head to foot with sweat, and oozing perspiration from every pore, I entered my room, tossed aside my sun helmet and my dark glasses. That room after a session outside beneath the Red Sea sun was always a shock. Inside it was only 95° F. because two large Westinghouse air-conditioning sets were running night and day with never a stop, to cool it down and dehumidify it. Coming in to that 95° after exposure to the ordinary Massawa heat and humidity outdoors was like being plunged abruptly into ice water. In spite of the heavy bathrobe in which I made haste to wrap myself, I shivered violently a few minutes from the chill. Then as I grew slowly accustomed to it, I locked all the doors to my room, unlocked the massive iron chest containing those highly confidential blueprints filched from the Italians

in Rome itself by British espionage agents, and spread out the plans for inspection.

My knowledge of Italian was poor and I made very heavy weather deciphering the technical notes which explained the workings of that mine when rigged for normal operation beneath the sea to blow up any vessel unfortunate enough to pass over it.

A little music, I reflected, might ease my mental strain the while I sought to unravel the combined complexities of both unfamiliar Italian and even less familiar Italian naval ordnance.

Over my desk was a very fine short-wave radio set I had bought some months before from an officer of the Royal Navy, a Lieutenant Hibble. Hibble, till then one of my shipmates in misery in Massawa, had been so hurriedly detached between two suns that he had been forced to leave behind his most prized possession in his sudden departure by plane. I have no doubt, however, that if it had been essential to him in making the weight limit on that plane, Hibble would gladly have jettisoned all his clothes also down to his skin and departed Massawa in only his sun helmet and his dark glasses.

At any rate, there was the short-wave radio set, all mine for twenty pounds sterling in the swiftest radio deal on record.

Ordinarily now I shrank from turning it on. The set was good enough (where I was on the Red Sea) to bring in clearly every station in the eastern hemisphere. But at practically every point on the dial from all over Europe and Asia about all I ever heard was voices in German, Italian, or Japanese alternating in English with assorted traitors from Lord Haw Haw through Axis Sally and Ezra Pound to Tokyo Rose, broadcasting triumphantly the latest British or American disasters and usually in those days with no need to embellish them much with any lies.

Squeezed closely in on the dial between two Axis stations was B.B.C. in London, the solitary audible radio station on the dial still remaining in Allied hands. With care I could get B.B.C., but getting it was hardly any more comfort to me, for even B.B.C. had to admit the disasters, and the natural British regard for conservatism prevented it from fabricating any victories as an offset to cheer its listeners.

There in the Middle East on the shores of the Red Sea we were

sandwiched in during most of 1942 between two enemies. The Japanese tide was running in full flood from the east and promising to break through India to engulf us. Rommel and his invincible Afrika Korps were rushing irresistibly from the west across the Libyan Desert to the gates of Egypt. From there he was confidently expected hourly to crash through a demoralized British Eighth Army to overwhelm us. As a consequence, our position had never been one from which we might listen with any great nonchalance either to Lord Haw Haw on the one side or to Tokyo Rose on the other pouring into our ears from the radio the latest news of our increasingly hopeless situation and our inexorable doom.

To us few Americans in Massawa sent to struggle with the mass of wrecks littering its harbors, the pitiless sun overhead was as much our actual enemy as either of those to the east or to the west of us, and was as inexorably draining us of life. Then what inducement was there to turn on the radio to learn how much closer our human enemies had closed on us since yesterday, unless it might be to satisfy an idle curiosity as to which of our three enemies would spell our end soonest?

A wan and shrunken captain in the Navy, long since nervously exhausted in Massawa in the battle against the sun, the sea, and those mercenary Americans (in safe and comfortable mountain billets far from the superheated Red Sea shores) who should have helped us but instead interfered, I had no such curiosity. I was resigned to whichever fate should first overtake us, hoping only in the interim to get as much done as was possible of the task we had been sent to Massawa to accomplish.

Still I reached to turn on the radio before I leaned my naked torso over to concentrate once again on those Italian plans. Even the Axis stations baited their triumphant propaganda programs with music (good music too, and some of it occasionally American) to entice their wearied and battle-worn enemies to tune in. After the music they hoped to hold their listeners while insidious propaganda destroyed what little morale still remained in their audience. Hoping I might get music to soothe my nerves on some station, enemy or not, it made no difference, and figuring on switching stations to dodge the propaganda and the inevitable bad news, I

turned on the radio switch. After a moment I began to swing the selector knob.

One after another distant stations came in as I swept across the dial. No music anywhere, worse luck. Instead, highly excited and violent voices were angrily shouting in German, in French, in Dutch, in Italian, even in Rumanian, Polish, and Greek, all Axis and all enemy of course. They seemed interested only in hammering home something of importance to their own nationals, since not one of the large stable of British and American traitors was pouring out at the microphone his usual poison in English. Evidently something out of the ordinary was up which had chased both music and English completely off the Axis air. I was left with a Babel of foreign tongues which were all Greek to me whether they came from Athens or Antwerp or any one of the multitudinous Axis stations in between.

Nothing remained to me then but B.B.C. in London, 3500 miles away, the most distant European station. Getting B.B.C. was always a delicate problem for me, especially in daytime, because the Axis had so carefully placed a station of its own close alongside B.B.C.'s wave-length on each side, which made the extricating of B.B.C. a difficult feat for most radio sets.

But my late British shipmate's set was up to it. Between the Scylla and Charybdis of raucous and animated German pouring loudly out on either side, I finally isolated B.B.C.

The next instant my chair was flying from beneath me across the room, I was on my feet shrieking deliriously. Both that booby-trapped mine inside the *Brenta* and its Italian plans on the desk before me were swept from my mind. Flowing from my radio set from B.B.C. in smooth, clipped, unexcited English were coming the sweetest words I ever heard over the air:

"An Allied Expeditionary Force has landed in North Africa. Powerful American and British armies under Lieutenant General Eisenhower, supported by British and American battleships, have already taken Algiers and are advancing on Casablanca and Oran. All is going well. We come as friends. Only token resistance is expected from the French, whom we have come to liberate."

AT LAST!

America was on the offensive, we had struck! And of all places, in North Africa! Rommel now, our arch enemy, was surely caught between Montgomery just starting savagely to strike his front from El Alamein in Egypt and Eisenhower landing in great force in Algeria in his rear! The Afrika Korps was doomed! The danger to us from the Libyan Desert was ended!

Dazedly I listened, dumb now after that first irrepressible shriek which had numbed my vocal cords. How could that Englishman on B.B.C. pour out the heavenly news so unexcitedly, how could anyone? Why didn't he shout as I had, even at the risk of being stricken speechless? B.B.C. had plenty of other broadcasters to carry on after him one after another. Why weren't they all bellowing like the Axis broadcasters, whom I now saw had ample reason for the violence and the unbridled torrents of anger in unknown tongues which I had just heard from every Axis capital? Then it came to me. He was English.

But I wasn't. Still trembling and in a delirium which only those who had gone through the same agony with me in Massawa might wholly understand, I listened tensely, my ear close to the loud-speaker lest I miss something. But there was no additional news—only the same announcement repeated over and over again. Finally I shut down the radio, retrieved my overturned chair, and sank into it.

Dazzling visions of escape from Massawa to a more human climate flashed one after another across my mind. With Eisenhower (who, anyway, was Eisenhower? I'd never heard of him) and an American army campaigning on the livable side of Africa three thousand miles from the burning shores of the Red Sea, surely we should all instantly be sent to help. An amphibious expedition such as his meant wrecks from bombs, mines, torpedoes and sabotage, and wrecks meant salvage and salvage meant my outfit. There in the Red Sea I had certainly the best salvage crew anywhere in Africa.

Subconsciously I started to edge toward the tinny Italian telephone on the left side of my desk. I half expected any moment now the ring from our army headquarters in distant Asmara, high in

the Eritrean mountains, which would bring news of my detachment. I made ready to pounce instantly on that phone lest even a split-second should be lost in my getaway.

But no such ring came—not that hour, not that day, not that week. Eisenhower was making fine progress, the French resistance (so the radio kept repeating) was only of a token nature. In three days Oran was on the point of capitulation, Casablanca (as well as Algiers which we already had) was delivered into our hands by Admiral Darlan, and the French in North Africa were co-operating with us and the British, accepting the fact that "We had come as friends." It became more evident each day from the radio news that Eisenhower apparently had no need of salvagers such as we to assist him.

Dully I resumed my former life, my iridescent dream of escape from Massawa and the Red Sea burst in my face like a child's soap bubble. With an effort, as a first step I forced myself again to the study of the Italian mine plans.

A few days later, with only three men anywhere near the *Brenta* (Buck Scougale on the bottom and Commander Davy of the Royal Navy and myself on the surface, to reduce the loss to three only if I were wrong), we three, handling that mine more tenderly than any newborn babe, cautiously snaked it up and out of the *Brenta* and turned it over ashore to a British explosives expert to disarm it. That done, we proceeded in more routine fashion with a full crew to the salvage of the *Brenta* herself, a job requiring perhaps two months with my worn-out men.

With that started under the supervision of Edison Brown and his crew on the salvage tug *Intent*, I turned to myself in earnest with my most experienced salvage master, Bill Reed, and the crew of a sister salvage tug, the *Resolute*, on my last important and my most difficult salvage task in Massawa. This was the recovery of a go-ton capacity floating crane. The Italians in sabotaging everything had sunk this in the harbor alongside an important quay where (aside from the loss of that invaluable derrick itself) it would do the Allies the most harm by making the berth unusable for shipping.

On that task, a British salvage company had already struggled

nine months that year, had failed dismally in two successive lifting attempts, and had finally thrown the job up as impossible, recommending the demolition of the crane by explosives as the only means of at least making usable the badly needed berth. But the British Admiralty, which needed the crane intact for future use even more than it needed the berth, refused to concur immediately in that defeatist recommendation. Though it had no great hope for success, the Admiralty had instead canceled the British contract and requested me and my salvage forces to attempt the recovery before it gave up altogether.

As much as an opiate to deaden the raw hurt from the collapse of my visions of escape as for any other reason, I now plunged head over heels into this problem. By outrageous improvisations, as the conversion of ex-Italian aviation gasoline tanks (pilfered from the Royal Air Force) into salvage gear, enough to make any salvage man blush to relate his methods in more orthodox salvage circles, on November 18, ten days after Eisenhower's landing on one side of Africa, we floated that priceless 90-ton crane to the surface on the other side, and turned it (as well as the cleared berth) over to the astonished and grateful British who had great need of it.

When that was done and the first flush of enthusiasm over our success was dissipated, which didn't take long under the Massawa sun, life lost all meaning as well as all hope of release. The last task of the many required to make Massawa into a usable base for British naval operations was now completed. Several dozens more of scuttled Italian and German wrecks (including the *Brenta*) remained around Massawa but only as an incubus now. These were valuable of course as ships if we could recover them, but obviously there were wrecks enough to occupy the scant forces given me for several normal lifetimes.

In view of that endless succession of wrecks what hope was there for us of living through another summer toiling on those blasted and sunken hulks? We were condemned to labor under conditions compared to which those faced by the French convicts on notorious Devil's Island were the height of comfort. No one, whether Eritrean black or European white, had ever been expected even by the Italians to work from April to October in Massawa beneath that

fiendish sun. And no Italians in their half a century of occupation before had even attempted to remain in Massawa throughout that season. The high hills about Asmara, always cool and comfortable 8000 feet above the steaming coast, was the normal refuge for them then.

But in that terrible year of 1942, it had been the summertime or never if the Mediterranean were to be saved, and my men and I had done what had not ever been attempted before in Massawa. We had *worked* feverishly there throughout the season when traditionally white men could not remain alive there even in idleness. Some who had come with me were dead and buried now in the baked coral dust of Massawa. Others, completely broken already, were on their way back to America, human wrecks. About a quarter of the force was always in the hospital suffering the tortures of the damned from what the sun had done to them. It had been a costly effort.

But we had succeeded in our aim. Although the Italians had sabotaged Massawa with fiendish skill before its surrender beyond any hope of restoration we had made it once again into a usable naval base. And what was more (and more unusual in 1942) in time too. God alone knew (or cared) what it had cost us. But when Alexandria ceased operating as a British naval base, under threat of imminent capture by Rommel, Massawa was ready by the grace of God and the efforts of a few American salvage men. Massawa took over as the solitary remaining naval base in the Middle East from which the crucial defensive war in the Mediterranean could be supported till the Allies were ready to strike offensively.

Now at last had come the offensive to which we had looked forward in the midst of our agonies, to afford us sure release, our solitary hope of escape other than on a stretcher or in a coffin from Massawa. And that hope had come to nought. Nobody needed us elsewhere, nobody wanted us, nobody cared. After the lifting of that scuttled crane, we went dully and lifelessly about our routine salvage of the vast array of remaining wrecks, a labor of Sisyphus to which there could be no end now, till the sun sent us to join our shipmates who were already laid away in superheated graves in the powdered coral of the burning desert fringing Massawa.

C H A P T E R

2

THE DREARY DAYS DRAGGED ON.

Remotely, as if from another planet, we listened occasionally to news of the war, news now of victories which might cheer others more fortunately located, but left us apathetic. Even with those victories, the war would last some years yet. We knew we would not last through even one more year. But still we listened.

Montgomery smashed Rommel's front at El Alamein and was chasing him completely across Libya, with Rommel and his broken Afrika Korps no longer retreating but fleeing westward in rout. Eisenhower (I knew now who he was) consolidated his grip on Morocco and Algeria and was moving eastward toward Tunisia to close the other jaw of the trap on Rommel.

Massawa's day was done. The war had moved elsewhere from the eastern Mediterranean.

The second week since Eisenhower's landings faded away, the third began, and still not the slightest sign of any call for us in Massawa or of need for any. A miracle must have occurred in the occupation of North Africa—there were apparently no wrecks and no sabotaged harbors requiring attention. The radio reports characterizing the French military resistance as token only, must have been true. "We had come as friends," and the friendly French had evidently taken our troops to their bosoms after a few shots in the air to satisfy their honor in resistance. All was going well in North Africa.

Late on November 24, when I had long since ceased expecting any such thing, came a dispatch to me from our War Department, transmitted by General Maxwell in Cairo, commanding all Ameri-

can Forces in the Middle East. With trembling fingers I slashed apart the envelope, read the paraphrased version of what had come in secret code from Washington:

"Referring to instructions issued by the War Department, Captain Edward Ellsberg is detached from the Middle East Command and will report immediately to General Eisenhower, Headquarters, Algeria, for duty in connection with urgent salvage work required in all North African ports. This action has been approved by the Navy Department. Air transportation has been arranged by the War Department via Khartoum and Accra. Proceed at once.

"MAXWELL."

As if emblazoned in letters of gold, the words of that dispatch danced before my dazzled eyes. My reprieve. Come now what might in the new war zone, I was at least saved from Massawa! Apparently Eisenhower's reception in North Africa had been not so friendly as advertised. That phrase "urgent salvage work required in all North African ports" had ominous implications.

The next few hours were a fury of packing what little I could take with me by air, of ordering all salvage work in Massawa belayed and my little salvage squadron to start loading salvage gear at once preparatory to circumnavigating Africa via the Cape of Good Hope so they might join me in the western Mediterranean.

At 3 A.M., with a native driver at the wheel, I raced away into the night beneath the burning tropic stars from the dusty peninsula on which stood the naval base which we had rehabilitated. Across the waters of the Red Sea gleamed the lights of a harbor full of ships which I had salvaged. Silently I gazed on them as my car sped by. I was leaving much of what had once been myself in exchange for them. Massawa had left scars on me I should carry the rest of my life.

Swiftly the car drew out of the ancient town and went roaring away through the darkness across the hot desert toward the mountains where lay Asmara and the airfield from which I should take off at dawn. Shortly we were climbing rapidly a steep mountain road. Long before we reached its top at 8000 feet, both the Red Sea and the Red Sea heat had faded away below us. It was Novem-

ber again, such a November as I had grown up to consider normal everywhere. I drew my long-disused overcoat over my sweat-soaked khaki. North Africa, in the midst of a savage campaign on land and sea, might possibly turn out to be more hectic than Massawa, but at least it would certainly be cooler. I turned up my overcoat collar, looked forward to it hopefully.

C H A P T E R

3

FROM ASMARA, CAPITAL OF ERITREA, to Algiers where I was to report to General Eisenhower, was some 5500 air miles over the route designated by the War Department which was then the only air route open to us. I must go practically due west, south of the Sahara across Africa to Accra on the Atlantic, then north from there across the Sahara itself in one long jump—altogether a very roundabout route. This was to dodge the enemy which held Tripoli and Tunisia, and the quite as unco-operative Vichy French who still held Dakar and all French West Africa and were as likely then to shoot down American planes as were their Nazi and Fascist associates.

My first and shortest hop was to Khartoum. In the chill of the early morning of November 25, I took off in a small plane from the airfield on the high plateau outside Asmara and with no regrets kissed Eritrea goodby forever.

At 4 A.M. on Thursday, November 26, Thanksgiving Day in America but in the Sudan just another weekday, I took off again in a twin-engined Douglas army transport for the 2600-mile jump across Central Africa to Accra. In the darkness the plane roared down the dusty strip of desert sand which formed the runway and lifted off into the hot dry air over the Sahara. The Nile, a gleaming strip of silver imbedded in the barren sands, soon faded astern of us into the night and the dawn broke to find us well out over the desert. Back in Massawa this day I knew I was missing a real Thanksgiving Day dinner, for which our British friends had spent weeks in assembling from far and wide the proper materials, to honor us on our national festival for our aid. My Thanksgiving

Day dinner was, however, only a few dried sandwiches eaten amidst the scorched sands near the edge of dismal Lake Chad where about noon we came down briefly to refuel. But I had no regrets. Not for worlds would I have traded those stale sandwiches in the middle of the Sahara for the turkey in Massawa I was missing.

I had to lay over two days in Accra. From Accra to Oran in Algeria on the Mediterranean it was 2300 miles due north over both French West Africa and the heart of the Sahara. For both these reasons it had to be spanned in a single jump with no landings possible en route, and only a four-engined plane could safely do it. Till the third day after my arrival, there would be no four-engined plane available in Accra for that trip.

Once more in the dense tropic darkness before dawn, I was underway again, this time in the biggest plane America had, a B-24, a huge four-engined Liberator bomber. This one was fitted for the trip with a large extra gasoline tank *inside* its flat-bellied cabin with us. Stripped of everything of which it could be stripped but still heavily overloaded with gasoline and jammed with urgent supplies for Eisenhower which had come boxed by air from America, that Liberator lifted only after a very long run. I held my breath lest the runway prove too short and we crash still not airborne with some thousands of gallons of highly volatile gasoline aboard to do a thorough job of incinerating us.

But between pilot and plane, we made it safely, and the laboring engines with their superchargers glowing, round masses of red hot iron standing startlingly out in the darkness beneath the wings, slowly gained altitude and the lights of Accra dropped away from us.

And again the dawn found us over the desert, this time going due north over the heart of the Sahara to hurdle the vast hump of Africa. Only far to the west of us along the coast where lay Monrovia, Freetown, and Dakar, were there any signs of civilization, but most of that coast was in unfriendly hands. That we were far away from it was a comfort—here over these wastes we need have no fear of airfields below from which Vichy French fighters (for we were over their territory) might rise to shoot us down.

But the law of compensation was working here in the desert as

well as elsewhere. We paid for our immunity from fighter attack by having below us only such endless stretches of barren, hot, and waterless sands as to insure our perishing there should we have to make a forced landing. One look downward at the limitless desert made that plain.

However, it was wartime and war soon brings its own philosophy of fatalism or one cracks up hurriedly. After that single look downward, I pushed the Sahara out of my mind, leaving it to the pilot and co-pilot to worry about getting us over those 2300 miles of desert to Oran without any involuntary let downs. As for myself, I picked out the top of the softest of the wooden crates filling the cabin abaft that ominous extra gasoline tank in our belly (there were, of course, no seats inside nor any unincumbered deck space) and stretched out to sleep my way as comfortably as I might through our monotonous flight over the hump of Africa.

C H A P T E R

4

By LATE AFTERNOON OF NOVEMBER 29, we were over Tafaraoui Airfield outside Oran, circling for a landing. The tropics and the arid Sahara with their eternal heat were far in our wake; both vanished abruptly the instant we had crossed the Atlas Mountains near the north coast.

Algeria and the coast of North Africa lay below us now, in about the same latitude as the Chesapeake Capes from which I had departed the winter before for Africa and no more summerlike in appearance that late November day. Even from the air as we descended, it was pleasingly obvious that not superabundance of heat but the absence of a satisfactory quantity of it would henceforth be one of my problems in this war theater. I had no winter clothing at all, save for my navy overcoat, and here I was on the edge of winter. Although it felt comforting to be in a cold climate again, I shivered in spite of my overcoat as we came about after rolling down the long runway at Tafaraoui, and taxied to the other end where I disembarked with my two bulging airplane bags to meet for the first time the chill dampness of Algeria in approaching winter.

A navy jeep was waiting to take me to my temporary billet in Oran, some fifteen miles off, till I should continue to Algiers. The sailor driving it waved as I descended from the belly of the Liberator to indicate my conveyance. I looked the situation over distastefully. Between me on the runway and that jeep lay over a hundred feet of something I had not seen for nearly a year—mud, good substantial gumbo mud, ankle-deep at least, and probably deeper. Evidently in Algeria it rained copiously and continuously. I mo-

tioned the driver to bring his jeep close up alongside me on the runway under the Liberator's starboard wing to take me and my baggage aboard.

The sailor acting as coxswain of that jeep did not concur. Availing himself of the centuries old right of a coxswain to decide for himself where he could safely take his craft in treacherous waters, he shook his head vigorously in dissent and shouted,

"No can do, Captain!" and pointed down to his wheels. I looked. Those wheels were already axle-deep in the mud where he was on what passed for an airfield road. He waved me again to come to him. As it was obvious that either the jeep or I must undertake the hazard of bogging down completely in the mud that lay between us, and even more obvious that I could more easily be extricated in such an event than could the jeep, I cast dignity to the winds. Floundering well over my shoe tops through sticky mud of which even Kansas might be proud, I struggled, ballasted down with my two bags, to the jeep.

"Sorry, Captain," apologized the bluejacket as I tossed my bags aboard and dragged my feet, now two heavy clumps of Algerian mud, into the seat alongside him, "I didn't dare get off the road to get any closer to you or this jeep would've submerged completely!"

I looked around, and had to agree with him. Except for the runways, the whole field was everywhere a mass of deep mud churned into bottomless furrows by innumerable heavy vehicles. Dozens of our twin-engined transports and scores of fighters were parked off the runways all around, every one with its landing wheels sunk deeply into the clinging mud.

Here was certainly a serious military problem. If those fighters particularly had to take off in a hurry for combat, it was dubious that they could ever get to the runway except with the help of a tractor dragging them one by one through the mud, and even that would not be done in any hurry. In an air raid, they would all be strafed to shreds on the ground. And this on Tafaraoui which had been the major French airfield protecting Oran which was the major French naval base in all Africa! Our air force was in for something if it had to fight this campaign against Rommel (not

the half-hearted French) off Algerian fields such as this one, or worse.

My bluejacket began manipulating the to me unfamiliar multitude of levers on his jeep, throwing in his four-wheel drive and the lowest low of his eight speed gears. He needed everything that jeep had in pulling power and all his skill besides before we finally churned our way out of the mud to the paved highway outside the field leading to Oran.

By then I had observed plenty more. Our army had foreseen the mud problem long before I had and had made such provision against it as was allowed by the shipping space for supplies it could get across the ocean and into Oran. G.I.s sunk knee deep in mud and plastered all over with it, were busily engaged in laying a wide mat of interlocked steel sheets over the airfield gumbo to make a workable parking space for the planes and some approaches to the runway. I grinned. The Air Force boys were always talking about winning the war all by themselves. But here it was plain that unless the Navy first hurriedly got ships enough across the U-boat infested Atlantic and safely into harbor to give them something to pave innumerable airfields, the Luftwaffe would shortly smash them before the Air Force ever got its planes out of the Algerian mud and into the air.

The jeep started for Oran. For some distance the highway skirted the edge of the airfield. Evidently there had been a fight for that airfield when our first wave of infantry rushing inland from the beaches had hit it on D-day morning. Fringing the edge of the field were the wrecked remains of French fighters, shot full of holes. Between the fact that the French planes were mostly obsolete types anyway, and the probability that few of them ever had opportunity to lift themselves out of the mud to meet our swift attack by strafing from the air, it could only have been a most unequal battle that gave us quick possession of Tafaraoui. But judging by the condition of those planes, the seizure of Tafaraoui certainly had been no token affair so far as the French forces were concerned.

We rolled some fifteen miles to the north along a good highway. As evening fell, we came from the landward side into Oran, a sizable city. Oran I found to be in no sense either African or exotic.

It was just an everyday seaport about as exciting to the eye as we threaded our way down its nondescript streets as Jersey City, save that here there was no Manhattan skyline across the way with its fairyland of lights glowing in the dusk to enchant the newcomer from the hinterland. Neither the harbor nor the sea was visible as we headed for the center of the city.

But if Oran itself was commonplace, what was going on in it wasn't. As my jeep swung for the last turn into its main square, the *Place de la Bastille*, facing which lay the Grand Hotel d'Oran, American headquarters and my billet for the night, an M.P., an American G.I., held up his hand and stopped us.

"Wait here, sailor," he curtly ordered my driver. "Colors."

We waited, of course. It was about sunset, time for "Colors" in all areas of civilized war, but something I had almost wholly forgotten. Over our wrecks in the Red Sea we had never paused at dusk for any such ceremonies.

Round the corner on the opposite side of the *Place de la Bastille d'Oran* came now the blare of martial music, "Over There." In a moment there swung into view an American band leading a company of grim-looking G.I.s in battle dress of olive drab, very businesslike in deep-drawn tin hats and fixed bayonets. What followed was the second surprise North Africa had in store for me.

Behind our troops came a French band, playing with a verve peculiar only to French military bands, also enthusiastically hammering out the strains of "Over There." Behind that band, marched another company of soldiers, but this time, bearded French, very odd-appearing in gaily colored baggy trousered uniforms but with strange tin hats and the longest and wickedest-looking bayonets I ever saw.

Here evidently was something new in fraternity. A few weeks before all these men had been shooting at each other. Now as I watched them from the jeep, the marching columns deployed into the square, drew up in line side by side, Americans to the right, French to the left, with their respective bands in front of them. There was a moment of silence as "Over There" came to an abrupt end. Then some sharp orders in French and in English and the bayonet-tipped rifles of all hands flashed to "Present Arms."

Then came the most striking "Colors" ceremony I had ever witnessed. Both bands, American and French alike, burst simultaneously into "The Marseillaise." All spectators round that crowded square—Arabs, French, Senegalese, Americans—bared their heads or came to salute. Looking upward in the *Place de la Bastille*, I saw that from two tall poles side by side in front of the massed troops the flags of France and of America were slowly starting down together. The flaming battle song which, for a century and a half had called out to all men to rise against despotism, rang out again in the still evening air of French North Africa.

Very slowly the Tricolor of France and the Stars and Stripes of America dropped together till at about halfstaff, the final stirring bars of "The Marseillaise" crashed out. With no pause then, instead of the conventional notes of the bugle call for "Colors" as I had always listened to it played at sunset, both bands broke into what I had not heard in Africa for a year, "The Star-Spangled Banner," another battle song, though younger than "The Marseillaise," conceived like it in combat, sounding the same urgent call of resistance to tyrants.

The legions of Hitler and of Mussolini were immediately awaiting us, Caesars the like of whom in evil the world had never seen, inhuman fiends to whom Louis XVI and George III alike were but kindly disposed old gentlemen. Was it any wonder that never had "The Star-Spangled Banner" so stirred me as when I heard it poured out that evening in the war zone in heartfelt strains as "Colors" by the sons both of France and of America!

The last note died away, the two flags fell side by side into the hands of waiting soldiers, were swiftly unbent from the halyards and folded up. More gruff orders in two languages, bayoneted rifles swung to shoulders, the lines broke into columns of squads, and "Colors" was over. To the gay strains of "Mademoiselle from Armentières" which had power also to stir men, but in other ways, the troops marched off. A storm of cheers, seemingly from the sky, roared out after them over the *Place de la Bastille*.

Looking up for the source of those cheers, I saw what before I had missed. From every window up to the roofs of the six- or seven-story buildings on three sides of the square came a fluttering of

handkerchiefs and heartwarming cries of "*Vive les Américains!*" Every window was jammed with French men and women waving frantically and shouting after the departing soldiers.

Here was something to write home about. Certainly this demonstration of the affection and the enthusiasm of everyday Frenchmen for their liberators was spontaneous. Men and women can be herded into vast squares to cheer themselves hoarse for their oppressors if they know what's healthy for them. I had seen plenty of such regimented cheering of Mussolini in Fascist Italy. But by no conceivable gestapo methods could all the inhabitants of all those apartments far above the streets have been forced to their windows to cheer. These Frenchmen and their wives were cheering us because that was the way they felt about it. Otherwise the women at least would have been busy in their kitchens at that hour, far from the front windows. There could be no doubt that these people, the plain citizens of Oran, believed us when we had said on D-day,

"We come as friends."

The troops vanished round the corner, the fluttering of handkerchiefs and the shouts from above started to die away. My eyes, still glued to that extraordinary spectacle aloft, came abruptly down to street level again as a raucous voice broke the spell,

"Come on, sailor! You're blocking the traffic! Step on it!"

The M.P. before us was imperiously waving us on again. My jeep rolled ahead a few yards further to disgorge me, muddy and chilled through, at my billet for the night in the unheated Grand Hotel d'Oran, already bulging with the headquarters staff of the troops which had just taken Oran from these cheering Frenchmen.

C H A P T E R

5

ONCE AGAIN I WAS UP BEFORE THE dawn of the last day of November to be jeeped back to Tafaraoui and continue on to Algiers and Eisenhower's headquarters.

This time, I found I was to proceed in convoy. Packed nose to tail at one end of a runway, stood a score of twin-engined transports, embarking troops from Oran to be moved up to the fighting line now bordering Tunisia. On another runway, similarly jammed together on the hard surface ready for a takeoff, waited a dozen fighters assigned as our air escort.

I clambered into the transport pointed out to me to find my fellow passengers there all army officers bound also for one reason or another to Algiers. Our plane, I learned, would travel eastward with the convoy only to a point well to the southward of Algiers. There while the rest of the convoy and all the fighter escort continued eastward into Tunisia, we should peel off and proceed on our own northward to Algiers without any fighters.

One close behind another in breath-taking succession the transports roared down the runway and lifted off, each to join in an ever-lengthening circular formation over the field till all were in the air. Then we straightened away eastward in two columns at no great height, with the fighters, which had taken off more swiftly even than we, flying in tight V's on both sides and astern of us and at somewhat higher altitude to cover us.

Day came but no sun. It was cloudy overhead, a typically gray late autumn day. Below as we went eastward Algeria was spread out, the Garden of Allah indeed, a lovely prospect from the air after what else I had seen of Africa. In rolling agricultural country

were immense wheatfields, all looking carefully cultivated; scattered groves of trees, presumably of oranges and olives; vast areas of vineyards; and here and there in the midst of what could only be plantations (they were much too large for farms) were pretentious chateaux and clusters of attendant buildings. Apparently the French proprietors had done very well for themselves in Algeria with Arab labor—only our ante-bellum South with its gracious mansions might have matched that view.

We flew onward toward increasingly hilly country. In the better daylight, I looked round inside the plane. It was the mate of every other twin-engined army transport I had flown in. With all its rivets, plates, and ribs showing, it was stripped of everything inside except long aluminum-topped benches on each side on which we sat. Overhead and leading aft to the solitary exit door to port was fitted the usual rod to which paratroopers might snap their parachute release rings when jumping at low altitude.

There was, however, one feature of this particular transport which was different. About amidships of the cabin, running on a slight diagonal from top to bottom on each side was a vertical row of neatly drilled and evenly spaced holes about four inches apart. Apparently they were unplugged rivet holes perhaps for a diagonal lifting band still to be fitted on the outside of the plane. At 160 miles per hour these were acting as unneeded ventilators on a cold morning so I asked the co-pilot who, now that we were well underway, was chatting with his army passengers in the cabin, what the purpose of those holes was and why they were not already fitted with rivets.

The co-pilot looked at me, recognized perhaps he had with him a dumb navy passenger unacquainted with the facts of life in the air, and explained courteously enough, though briefly, without even a look at what I had indicated.

"Oh, those? Last trip east a Nazi fighter made a pass at us from starboard. They're the holes from his machine-gun bullets. We haven't had a chance to patch them yet. But don't worry; they don't weaken the plane."

A little embarrassed, I shut up and our conversation ceased. But my eyes could not help traveling time and again back to those

ominous rows of holes. They registered nicely with about the fifth seats from forward on the aluminum benches both port and starboard. Perhaps the plane hadn't been weakened any by them, but I wondered about the soldiers who might have been sitting or standing last trip in way of those holes. They would have been weakened considerably. What about them? But as the co-pilot seemed not to be in a mood to volunteer any further details, I felt it impolitic to ask and the episode remained unclarified.

Some two hours after the take-off, over fairly mountainous country, our plane peeled off from its position in the port column and with no obvious adieu to the rest of the convoy, we headed away northward by ourselves. My eyes wandered from the bullet holes on both sides of me to gaze regretfully at the fighters still flying protectively above the fast disappearing convoy. I felt like a sitting duck.

However, I noted immediately that our pilot was evidently no foolhardy daredevil. He seemed to be no more anxious than I was to offer again his now unprotected and unarmed transport as a target to prowling Nazi fighters. Swiftly we started to lose altitude till we were below the ridges of the surrounding mountains. We became invisible to searchers except from directly overhead, and so low were we in the valley that any fighter diving on us now stood a fine chance of cracking up before he could pull out of his dive and start weaving on our tail through that irregular pass.

So we flew on safely enough by ourselves shielded by the surrounding mountains till we emerged on the plains not far south of Algiers into an area not likely to be molested in daylight by stray Nazis. Shortly thereafter we set down on Maison Blanche Airfield some eight miles to the southeast of Algiers. In a few minutes in a staff car, I was on my way to my final destination, six days en route from Massawa.

There followed three hectic days at headquarters. Most of the rest of my first day was consumed in the billeting process. From my orders, it appeared I was to be a permanent addition to General Eisenhower's staff in Algiers. The billeting officer, an army captain, shook his head dubiously. He hadn't a permanent billet left on his list of accommodations.

"Right now this town's worse than wartime Washington for housing, Captain. But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll run you in at the Hotel Aletti. A couple of days is the regular limit there for anybody, but I'll stretch that a bit if necessary and maybe by then somebody around here'll either be killed or be transferred and that'll make a vacancy for you. O.K.?"

My room was a very fine one indeed, beautifully carpeted and furnished, though here and there the wallpaper was strangely marred. And of all things, it had a private bath! Apparently my four stripes were paying off, at least in Algiers.

Not till I was dressed again after a lukewarm bath did it strike me that someone had neglected to raise the window shades and open the inside shutters of my room to let in some daylight. The only light in that completely shuttered room came from a not very powerful electric ceiling lamp, a very evident waste of electricity in broad daylight in a city which could not have any surplus of fuel for power generation in wartime. I went to the window to open the shutters and raise the shades before I turned out the light.

The shutters on the inside easily folded back, disclosing the fact that there were no shades, either up or down, though the room remained as innocent of daylight as before. The reason was obvious. Every pane of glass in both top and bottom windows was smashed and over the empty window frames cardboard had been tightly nailed from the outside. I raised the lower sash of the blanked-off window and looked out.

Directly across a narrow street facing me was a gutted six-story building. Its roof and the upper floors had collapsed. Through the gaping windows in the still standing walls I could see the dismal wreck of the interior where a Nazi bomb had exploded not fifty feet away. No wonder my window had no glass. I understood now also the half dozen or so holes marring the plastered walls of my room to which I had given little thought before. They must be shrapnel holes from fragments of the bursting bomb across the way. Soberly I closed the window again to shut out the wind and the cold, though simultaneously, of course, I again shut out the daylight. And for what little good they might be in stopping future shrapnel, I carefully also secured the wooden shutters inside. Ap-

parently being billeted in the Hotel Aletti had drawbacks. Its beautiful location beside the harbor put it right in the path of straying bombs aimed (but none too accurately) at the ships alongside the quays.

Next morning, dressed in my one and only blue uniform which I had not worn before in Africa, I went to report to headquarters. Headquarters was the Hotel St. George, a vast, rambling, antique tourist hostelry topping the steeply sloping hillside overlooking the sea against which much of Algiers was built. The St. George, now no longer serving as a hotel, had been taken over, lock, stock, and barrel for offices for all the assorted nationalities and armed services which Eisenhower was endeavoring to weld into a single co-ordinated fighting unit.

It was clear that it was useless in that maelstrom to try to report directly to General Eisenhower, the orders stated that. Even getting by the sentries into the St. George without a headquarters identity card, in spite of my regular naval pass, had been difficult enough. I decided it would be best to make contact first with some junior who might know the ropes, his army aide perhaps.

I was overjoyed then to learn at the inquiry desk that the Commanding General's personal aide was, of all things for a general, a naval officer, a lieutenant commander. Here was luck indeed. Certainly I could get in to see any two-and-a-half-striper without trouble, and since he was a naval officer as well as Eisenhower's personal aide he could brief me on the details of that "urgent salvage work required in all North African ports" for which I had been rushed out of the Red Sea.

Lieutenant Commander Butcher greeted me cordially enough, but I soon learned that he was a social not a naval aide. I learned further that I couldn't see Eisenhower that day. At midnight of the day before he had just returned from the muddy front in Tunisia with a bad cold. Lest it turn into flu, his surgeon had stowed him away in bed. And even when he rose, I probably couldn't see him for a day at least; he would be wholly engaged in matters of state with Darlan and various other French dignitaries, including Giraud. It seemed the Commanding General was trying

to get them to see the Axis as the only enemy while the only enemies they really seemed to recognize were each other and General de Gaulle (who was in London).

"There's nobody in our Navy actually attached to the headquarters staff here, Captain," Butcher told me. "The Royal Navy's responsible for the Mediterranean, and their Admiral Sir Andrew Browne Cunningham runs the naval show, reporting to Ike. So our naval staff here is all British too. But there are a couple of Americans in Algiers on liaison work for the Navy Department back home, and I'm sure they know. You probably know them. There's Jerry Wright, a four-striper, who's been with us some time and'll probably stay, and Rear Admiral Bieri who's bound home soon."

I knew them both, particularly Bieri, who had been a first classman at the Naval Academy the year I entered in 1910 as a plebe. With a G.I. guide called back as escort, I was soon on my way to see Bieri. Before I left, Butcher promised to let me know at my hotel when I was to report officially.

I was certainly glad to see Bieri again. As befitting his task as liaison officer between Admiral King (our C-in-C and Chief of Naval Operations) and General Eisenhower, he knew what had happened in the naval assault and the French resistance, and so far as anybody knew, why those things had happened, and what was necessary to remedy them. What nobody knew for sure, he had already made some shrewd guesses at, and he very willingly gave me the benefits both of his knowledge and of his estimates.

There was nothing "taken" about the French naval resistance either at Oran or at Casablanca. Both ports had been the scene of fierce naval actions, particularly bloody and disastrous to us at Oran. The harbor of Casablanca, though still usable, was as a result a wreck from our heavy naval shells. But the harbor of Oran was the major problem. After inflicting on us heavier casualties there both on land and on sea than anywhere else, the French admiral at Oran before capitulating to our land forces under General Fredendall had sabotaged the harbor and everything in it most thoroughly. He had sunk block ships at the entrance and scuttled everything else alongside the main quays. Oran was a mess.

There were only two major harbors in the Mediterranean capable of supporting a heavy offensive against the Nazis in Tunisia. They were Oran and Algiers. Casablanca on the Atlantic, damaged or not, was too far away from Tunisia to be of much help. It had been seized for other purposes now accomplished—to insure the neutrality of Spain and to counter Franco's joining with or permitting the Nazis to sever our Mediterranean lifeline at the narrow Straits of Gibraltar. Swashbuckling Patton at Casablanca had already settled those problems.

But the swift restoration of sabotaged Oran to full usefulness was imperative, both because Rommel was falling back on Tunisia, and even more so because the Nazis already had thrown a large new army under von Arnim into Tunisia from Sicily and were feverishly reinforcing it. Unless Eisenhower managed to knock out von Arnim before Rommel joined him, the elimination of their joint forces would require a build up from overseas of Eisenhower's army in Algeria far beyond the original 107,000 men with which he had seized Algeria and Morocco. Eisenhower's needs for unfettered port facilities to permit this were bad enough already.

On top of everything else, the need would soon be much worse when Montgomery's Eighth Army chasing Rommel, also entered Tunisia in his wake. By then Montgomery would be 1500 miles over desert roads from Cairo—overly far from his Egyptian bases. Montgomery must then be supplied at least partly from near by North African ports, or Rommel, resupplied from Tunisia, would turn on him, and he might find himself not much better off than von Paulus at that very moment hamstrung and being cut to pieces before Stalingrad at the end of a similarly overstretched supply line. Exactly that had happened twice before already to British armies which had driven deep into the Libyan Desert from Egypt.

To make the picture complete, Bieri threw in the further fact that the Nazis knew as well as ourselves the importance to us of the Mediterranean ports—their night bombing attacks to knock them out had caused damage enough already and were getting worse. We had been handicapped in air defense by mud on most of our fields (that I already knew), by lack of night fighters, and by insufficient radar equipment for good night control of the A.A.

batteries we did have. Since D-day, we had taken an awful licking from the air in ships bombed and sunk all the way east from Algiers to Bône just behind the fighting line. I would shortly see that. And now to top it all off, U-boats were becoming decidedly more active with their torpedoes off the whole north coast.

Between bombed ships, torpedoed ships, and scuttled ships, the Mediterranean was a very hot area. There was plenty of salvage work required already, there was going to be plenty more, and that was why I had been taken out of the Red Sea. But still the most urgent problem was unquestionably Oran and its sabotaged harbor; it must be restored immediately.

"That sounds worse than I expected, Admiral, though I'm no optimist," I had to admit when Bieri finished. "Now tell me, what salvage forces are there to tackle all this with?"

"Not much," replied Bieri soberly. "In a naval way, the Mediterranean by agreement between London and Washington is a British responsibility. You'll have to look to the British. You'll find a few American divers in Oran and some diving suits, I guess, but nothing else of ours. There's a British salvage ship there, sent from Gibraltar; a good one, I'm told, though she's got no divers at all. And that's the whole story. Sorry."

I had to think. This sounded like Massawa all over again when I first got there by air—a major port to be cleared in a hurry and next to nothing in the way of salvage ships, men, and materials prepared in advance for the job—a situation I had never believed would be duplicated again in this war. But apparently it had been in Oran. The prospect nearly floored me. Physically I wasn't the person I had been the winter before—the year spent struggling with Massawa had taken care of that. Where I really belonged after Massawa was in the Naval Hospital in Washington. Eisenhower had sent for a very broken reed to tackle his salvage problem in North Africa.

But there was no help for it. Sick at heart, I thanked Bieri for his time and his generously given information. Then escorted out of G.H.Q. by the inevitable G.I. guide, I went back to the Aletti. Completely sunk, I flopped down on the bed and tried to figure a way out. I had been cherishing the childish illusion that with an

American as overall Commanding General and its own soldiers heavily involved, the resources of America would, if not already prudently provided in abundance for the task, at least be available for salvage in North Africa. Now I knew better.

"You'll have to look to the British." I wondered if Bieri knew the full meaning of his words. Massawa had taught me what they meant. To every request on the British there for anything, came always as reply the unvarying response,

"There is none available."

And it was true too. The British were exhausted, terribly mauled, and already bled white as to the target of two years of blitzkrieg while we were still neutral. Straining every salvage resource to keep English ports open in the face of magnetic mines constantly planted to block them, they had nothing available for salvage work elsewhere.

C H A P T E R

6

A LITTLE BEFORE NOON, THE TELEPHONE rang to inform me that General Eisenhower would be up from his sick bed that afternoon and that I might, if lucky, perhaps see him briefly before he had to leave for a hospital tour of the wounded. If I missed him, I might as well report to his Adjutant General, who had been given the General's instructions. I rushed back up the hill to G.H.Q.

I found Eisenhower very sober and looking very tired, quite evidently submerged in a thousand problems, all of them headaches. He looked at me, I looked at him. What he thought of me, if anything, I don't know. From his looks, I thought a little more help, understanding, and support from home wouldn't hurt him. He scanned my orders briefly, said,

"Glad to see you here, Captain," as if he meant it, and turning to an Army aide, ordered him to see that Colonel Daly, his adjutant, endorsed my orders as having reported. "You report now to Admiral Cunningham, Captain, for duty," he continued. "He'll put you to work. There's lots," and with that he was on his way.

After some delay waiting for my orders to be endorsed, on inquiry from Colonel Daly I learned that there was no need (or use either) to wait for my orders. When his overburdened staff had put on the proper endorsement, made God only knows how many copies as required by regulations, and he had signed the original, my orders would be returned to me at the Aletti. From the looks of the adjutant's office packed with G.I.s hammering away none too expertly on typewriters, trying to reduce the mountains of papers before them, I judged that not the least of Eisenhower's headaches

was getting paper enough to carry on the war as per regulations.

So about the middle of the afternoon, I turned to to carry out my oral orders to report to Admiral Sir Andrew Browne Cunningham, G.C.B., R.N., the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief. I knew him only as a legendary figure in the Middle East, where, with inferior forces always, he had in the first years of the war so savagely battered the powerful Italian fleet every time it left its harbors (and once even inside its harbors) that an Italian super-dreadnought nowadays hardly dared face a British cruiser. But I had never seen him, for a few weeks after my arrival in the Middle East, he had been detached from the Mediterranean Fleet and gone to America to set up the task he now had in North Africa.

Admiral Cunningham was the highest ranking officer afloat of Britain's mighty navy, latest of a long line of fighting admirals running centuries back through Nelson to Drake and Hawkins who had smashed the Spanish Armada for Queen Elizabeth. There was nothing pretentious nor bellicose about Cunningham from his clothes to his manner. Here was Britain's top commander, a Knight Grand Cross of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, reflecting the scarcity of everything in England, dressed in tarnished gold lace and threadbare blues, frayed at the edges, gone at the buttonholes, repaired at the elbows. Such a wornout rig would have been disdained by an American ensign for anything save unavoidable inspection of the double bottoms.

Admiral Cunningham himself, clearly older than any others in the Allied African top command, seamed in the face, rather ruddy in complexion, square-jawed, thin enough to make him seem taller than he was, and, if there is such a thing as a typical Englishman, not at all looking like one to me, greeted me cordially by name, showing possibly he was as good a diplomat as a sailor. And further to confirm that impression, after seeing that I was seated in the best chair he had, he suggested to his Chief of Staff, Commodore Roger Dick, that it might be a splendid idea if the marine orderly outside scouted up some tea for the three of us to compensate a bit for the chill of his unheated office. That he should go to so much trouble for a captain reporting to him, clearly showed

his tact, for four-stripers were as common in the Royal Navy as in the American.

So my official tour in the North African campaign started very informally and quite cozily in tea for three served in most unmartial surroundings. But the coziness swiftly faded out as I listened to my new chief.

"Now, Ellsberg," said the Admiral in words only slightly British in his crisp enunciation, "I'm the one who told General Eisenhower to send for you. I knew of your work in the Red Sea. I want you to clear out Oran so it's usable first. Meanwhile do what you can to the other harbors. Then there's a U-boat we damaged scuttled off Tenes between here and Oran in not very deep water. If you can search that with divers, you may recover secret codes that will be valuable. But mainly I want to learn how far the Nazis have gone in fitting their U-boats with radar and anything like our Asdic for finding their targets either on the surface or submerged. Finally, of course, there'll be various torpedoed or bombed ships in the Mediterranean to be saved if you can. I'm assigning you in command of all Allied salvage forces for this theater."

Rather grimly as I finished my tea I suggested to the Admiral that I had it on good authority there wasn't much to command, only one British salvage ship with no divers and a negligible quantity of American divers of unknown and uncertain value, all at Oran. Could anything be done to improve that situation?

Immediately I saw that I had unwittingly rubbed a raw wound. Admiral Cunningham's eyes practically flashed fire and he flushed angrily. I noted for the first time as I looked into his flaming eyes, that one of them, the right one, seemed permanently bloodshot, accentuating his angry glance. Ignoring my question, he said in incisive tones that admitted of no discussion,

"You mention that salvage ship at Oran, the *King Salvor*, which I sent there from Gibraltar. It is reported to me that her salvage officer, Lieutenant Commander White, has been relieved of his command by the American admiral in Oran and replaced by the American lieutenant in charge of the divers you refer to, all without reference to me. Officers of His Majesty's Navy may *not* be removed save by my orders. Immediately on your return to Oran,

Ellsberg, you will replace White in his command. And see that such a performance is not repeated."

"Aye, aye, sir," I acknowledged a little numbly. What sort of mare's nest in Oran was I supposed to clear out? Weren't the wrecks enough? Now I, a captain, was to go to Oran and practically slap the American admiral's face there by peremptorily reversing his orders, all in an international situation concerning which I knew nothing whatever, but obviously loaded with dynamite. However, Admiral Cunningham was now my chief, and if those were his orders, I'd carry them out. And from the steely look in his eyes, there was no question but that those were his orders. I judged it best to make no comment at all.

That insult to the Royal Navy had evidently been rankling in his breast, but with it off his mind, Cunningham resumed his previous informal tone and answered my question.

"Quite as you say, Ellsberg, about forces. Very regrettable indeed. But I have hopes of improving things a bit. I'm trying to get a sister to the *King Salvor* down here from England to help out and some British divers. Then there are some French divers in Oran who'll come under your command also. But I'm afraid that will be all. You will do the best you can."

That led up to the only ray of hope I had been able to glimpse while I had pondered the problem at the Hotel Aletti. I sprang it on Cunningham. .

"Admiral, I had in Massawa three small salvage ships and about a dozen divers, five of them good, and some fine salvage mechanics. When I was detached a week ago, I took a chance and ordered the ships to quit diving and start loading everything to come here via the Cape of Good Hope. I couldn't actually order them underway here, for the orders I got were simply for me, not including my salvage ships. But you can see they're ordered here immediately. This area is more important than the Red Sea now. These ships'll be a great help—two of them are fine tugs—only it's 10,000 miles round the Cape and it'll take a couple of months before they get here to lend a hand."

Admiral Cunningham thought it a fine idea. There ensued an earnest discussion between him and his Chief of Staff, Commodore

Dick, over whether the ships at Massawa might not be ordered via Suez and the eastern Mediterranean, only 3000 miles, instead of via the 10,000 mile Cape route. But the Mediterranean between us at Algiers and Suez was not open. The British were taking terrible losses from air attacks from Sicily trying to get ships through from the west only as far as Malta to keep it supplied from Gibraltar. The axis-controlled bottleneck between Sicily and Tunisia effectually throttled all through traffic to Alexandria or Suez. That was so obvious that as a present measure, the passage of my ships wasn't even considered. The discussion centered on whether in a month or so Eisenhower might have Tunisia and thus open the route at least to vessels hugging the shelter of the African shore. My ships, if they started via Suez, might wait out that month somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean, possibly at Tobruk in Libya, where they could be usefully employed in clearing that wrecked harbor while they waited.

I objected. If there had to be a month's delay in passage, my ships could hardly arrive much sooner via Suez than via Capetown. And being slow vessels, incapable of dodging any bombs, there still was a chance that even with Tunisia in our hands, air raiders from Sicily would knock them off en route or they might strike mines and be lost. And with them would go invaluable salvage gear that I now knew only too well I could never get replaced either from America or England. Finally, who knew whether Eisenhower would really take Tunisia in a month? If he didn't, there would be more delay which would make the passage take longer even than via the Cape. And in addition, during that delay if my ships got heavily wound up in clearing Tobruk harbor, there was bound to be a fight with the Eastern Mediterranean Command over breaking them away from there to leave in the midst of an uncompleted operation. There might, for all I knew, be trouble enough in breaking them away immediately from Massawa. Why add to it at Tobruk?

Both Admiral Cunningham and his Chief of Staff agreed. Passage via the Cape, long as it might take for my three tiny ships, was surest, safest, and probably quickest. At least some day we'd

get the ships that way. So Commodore Dick was ordered to get the names of the three vessels and, through Washington, get them detached immediately from Massawa and the Middle East Command and started via Capetown for the western Mediterranean. In about two months, if there was not too much red tape to be cut in Washington arranging the transfer, we might expect to see them off Oran.

But even two months was still two months too long to wait in semi-idleness in Oran with only the slight, unknown, and dubious forces there to clear it. I had one further idea to help. Beyond any question I wouldn't see my salvage ships for two months yet nor their priceless salvage gear. But working with next to nothing, so long as I had a few good men to work with, was becoming second nature. And with Admiral Cunningham's assistance I might get the few good men in time to do some good. I broached the second half of my idea.

"Admiral, in Massawa I was serving under the army command of our General Maxwell in Cairo. General Eisenhower, I think, can radio him direct and ask to have him transfer here in a special plane *immediately* what I need most—as many of my divers and their diving rigs as the plane will carry. What do you think of that?"

"Excellent idea, Ellsberg! I'm certain it can be done quickly. I knew your General Maxwell while I was in Egypt myself as C-in-C, Med. He's a fine officer whom I know will do everything he can to help us. You tell Dick here what you want, and he'll prepare the dispatch to Maxwell for General Eisenhower's signature. Now you take tomorrow to look the situation over in Algiers and get acquainted at Headquarters, then return to Oran. Commodore Dick will see your orders making you Principal Salvage Officer are sent you there. Anything else, Ellsberg, before you shove off?"

There was lots, but I could think of nothing that would be helped any by discussing it then, so I replied, "No," and rose to leave. I might as well get to work.

"There's only one thing more then, Ellsberg," said Cunningham, rising also. "Feel free to come back to see me on anything whenever you think necessary. We'll always back you up here." From

the real warmth of his parting handshake, I had no doubt of it and felt better. Before I got through with what I'd already heard of the treacherous tangle of international jealousies and inter-service bickerings that passed for allied co-operation in North Africa, I was sure I'd need plenty of backing up.

C H A P T E R

7

THERE WAS AN ALERT THAT NIGHT.

Air raid sirens wailed, somebody below pulled the switch in the Aletti, all the room lights went out. I seized the tin hat I had borrowed passing through Oran, and dashed for the roof. I had better see for myself what our ships were up against.

By the time I got up the stairs to the roof, which wasn't long as I was billeted high up, Algiers was completely blacked out. Still, how much good the blackout was going to do was questionable. Practically every building in Algiers was white, and there they all were standing plainly out in the clear night against the steep hill-side facing the bay, beautifully outlining the city. As if that were not enough to mark the target, on the crest of the hill slightly to the westward of me, a tall white marble monument (resembling our Washington Monument on a reduced scale) stood boldly out against the sky, forming a perfect marker as a point of departure for any bomber starting a run over the harbor.

The harbor itself, the target, of course, was jammed with ships of all kinds. It lay practically at my feet, stretching both ways in a long narrow crescent enclosed on the sea side by a massive break-water forming the outer quay. So thickly were vessels packed inside that harbor, it seemed impossible to drop a bomb there without striking one of them.

The sirens had quit screaming. An unearthly silence gripped Algiers waiting its ordeal. All vehicles had stopped, everyone on the streets had fled to air raid shelters. I knew there would be a twenty-minute interval between the alert and the bombs—Algiers

always had that much warning from the stations to the eastward of it toward Tunisia.

But if Algiers waited in silence, it was not waiting in idleness. Around that harbor I knew there was now the greatest concentration of A.A. guns anywhere in the world outside of London. Then six British Beaufighters, specially equipped with radar for night attack, had just arrived to fill a sad gap in the air defense. They must already be taking the air from Maison Blanche, in their special coloring to fade into instant invisibility in the night skies. And below me to seaward I began to see closely-spaced smudges of smoke rising all around the harbor periphery, from the outer breakwater as well as from the quays on the landward side. As I watched, the smudges swiftly grew into pillars, spread out, vastly increased in volume. Soon, almost magically as befitted such an Arabian Nights city, the harbor and all the ships in it had vanished completely, invisible beneath a widespread lazy cloud fringing the sea side of the city. Algiers was ready.

A few more minutes dragged painfully away. Wholly alone on the roof of the highest building in the vicinity, I waited, having already scouted out the chimneys on the Aletti's topside which might afford me some shelter from shrapnel.

The drone of engines became faintly audible toward the east, swiftly increased to a roar. The bombers were approaching. Searchlights abruptly flashed on, long pencils of unearthly blue light started to feel about the eastern skies. But so far as I could see, they picked up nothing. The bombers kept on coming, as yet wholly invisible from the ground. From the noise, they must be somewhere nearly overhead, still undetected.

Then simultaneously from round about the harbor, all hell broke loose. The anti-aircraft batteries had opened up, guns of all calibers were roaring, the whole sky over the harbor was cut to pieces with fiery tracers streaming upward in terrific volume. The guns must be firing by such radar control as they had, for there were certainly no targets visible to any of the gunners.

That umbrella of streaking projectiles and bursting shells far above the harbor was apparently too much for the unseen bomber formation. It changed direction and swerved inland to the south-

ward to curve back and make its bombing run from the west, for the gunfire decreased in volume and swung along that path, while the noise of the engines decreased markedly.

Soon the droning of airplane engines started to swell again, kept on rising. This time the bombers apparently meant business. On they came, still not one caught by the searchlights. Again the ground guns concentrated protectively over the hidden harbor and its invaluable shipping.

Cutting now through both the roaring of guns and the beat of engines came a new sound, a shrill whistling. Instinctively I plastered myself flat against the heaviest chimney, on the side opposite the harbor. I had heard that whistling before, both in Cairo and in Alexandria. The bombs were away!

The whistling increased to a fiendish shriek, while I strove to flatten myself out even flatter against the chimney. Those bombs would be close.

Then came the bursts. For an instant, Algiers was illuminated brilliantly in split-second succession by a dozen flaming volcanoes and my eardrums rang to the concussion of heavy explosions to which the previous racket had been nothing. And I saw I had chosen the wrong side of the chimney. Every bomb had struck to landward of the hidden harbor—the bombers had not dared enter the blazing inferno of shells over the ships.

A red glow lighted up the sky perhaps a hundred yards inland and uphill from me. One bomb at least had landed on a building there; now it was in flames. Below in the streets I heard the clatter of trucks. The French fire brigade, already at the alert, was on its way. But as I ran to the parapet to peer in the direction of the fire, I could see the firemen were going to have trouble. Down the steeply sloping street toward the Aletti came a cataract of water—apparently other bombs bursting in the street itself had ruptured the water main there.

Where the remaining bombs had struck except probably in the open, I couldn't tell. There were no other fires. But certainly they hadn't landed in the harbor. And the gunfire was drawing away to the eastward in the wake of the bombers. None of them had

been touched—they were still shrouded in darkness, still wholly unseen.

Evidently the bomber formation then broke up, probably by arrangement, to scatter the targets, disperse the gunfire, and give the bombers better opportunity for individual runs over the harbor. At any rate, that seemed the plan, for the droning of the engines came now from several different directions over Algiers. Both the searchlight beams and the gunfire broke up into groups working different sectors of the dark sky feeling for the targets which the radar indicated there, but not accurately enough to get either shells or searchlights on the circling planes.

But if that was the Nazi tactic, it came to grief. A new factor had entered the battle. Suddenly every searchlight went out, every gun stopped firing. Except for the dull glow of the flames nearby and the beat of engines in the sky, peace, quiet, and darkness reigned again over Algiers. I had an inkling of what that meant, though apparently the Nazis overhead hadn't. As well as if I had had a pair of phones strapped over my ears, listening in, I knew the word had just gone out over the whole Algiers fire control circuit,

"Cease fire! Night-fighter has the target!"

I swung my eyes toward the monument topping the hill to the westward, its white marble shaft easily visible there against the night. It would be from over there that any good bomber would start his dead-reckoning run for the smoke-hidden harbor. And it should be there that the Beaufighters would be lurking.

It was even more calm and peaceful over that monument a mile or so away than where I was. Nothing whatever was visible there.

But not for long. A stream of tracers suddenly etched a fiery trail high up in the dark sky, a trail composed of not very elongated straight red dashes in the blackness, a very short trail, ominous in its shortness. Evidently having homed by its own radar close in on the tail of an unsuspecting bomber before opening fire, every shot from the Beaufighter's guns was striking home. Not a single tracer missed to cut the usual long curving red path in the sky beyond.

As suddenly as it had begun, the short burst of tracers ceased. Darkness again. Why, I wondered, had not the night-fighter kept on firing to make sure of the job? Why take a chance on that

Nazi's getting away to bomb us again?

But evidently the Beaufighter had made sure. For a few seconds later, a tiny point of light like a new bright star glowed in the sky high over the monument, heading for the harbor. As it came on, it glowed more brightly, swelled rapidly in size till it more resembled the ball of fire that was the sun. In a long curving arc it passed diagonally over the harbor, a flaming sphere like a vast meteor now, gradually losing altitude all the time. Not a gun fired as it passed overhead, an easy target for the ground guns. It wasn't necessary.

Still at fair elevation it crossed the line of the outer breakwater, was out over the open sea beyond, steadily but evenly dropping lower, constantly increasing in size and brilliance. Then as instantaneously as if a shutter had snapped behind it, the huge blazing ball vanished. The sea had closed over that bomber, still in full flight when it struck.

That ended the air raid. Whatever the other bombers in that now dispersed formation had intended to do, they changed their minds immediately and started for home instead. That meteoric path of fire cut in the night skies over Algiers by the first Nazi bomber making a solitary run over the harbor and its sudden extinguishment in the sea, must have unnerved them. It took no vivid imagination to figure the fate of that bomber's crew.

There were no more bombs, there was no more gunfire, the hum of engines in the sky faded out. Shortly the "All Clear" sounded. Only the fire about a block away and the water still gushing noisily down the steep street beneath me remained to mark what had happened. But as the handicapped firemen seemed to have the blaze confined to that one building, I went below to my relighted room in the Aletti and finished the letter home I had been writing when the lights went out.

C H A P T E R

8

THE PLANE IN WHICH I WAS TO return to Oran would not take off till late afternoon. So next morning in accordance with Admiral Cunningham's instructions to get acquainted in Algiers, I circulated through the St. George. I had now been fitted with a G.H.Q. pass, very officially stamped and signed by "J. J. Baker, Colonel Infantry, Headquarters Commandant," so that I was no longer required to go about the building in custody of a G.I. guard. Colonel Baker's flowing signature seemed to have much magic in it.

I went to see first Captain Jerauld Wright, U.S.N., "Jerry" Wright, who was scheduled to remain as permanent liaison for Admiral King with Eisenhower's forces. Poor Jerry had been through the mill already, and had good reason to fear that worse was yet to come.

It was Wright who had been put nominally in temporary command of the British submarine *P 219*, the *H.M.S. Seraph*, of which Lieut. N. L. A. Jewell, R.N., was actually the captain, authorized by special dispensation to fly American colors when it was dispatched from Gibraltar a few days before D-day in North Africa. Its mission was to make possible the escape of General Giraud from Vichy France.

Giraud was the French military hero in whom our political savants had put their trust to convince the French in North Africa by radio broadcasts at H-hour that we *had* come as friends. He was to order them not to resist. He was to inspire them to rise as one man immediately we had landed and assist us in throwing out their Nazi and Fascist conquerors.

Jerry Wright took a very dim view of Giraud. As scheduled, at the appointed rendezvous on the French coast, he had picked General Giraud up in the dark of the night of November 4, nearly losing him when the general fell overboard in the darkness during the transfer from small boat to sub. Then with Giraud safely aboard, the sub had promptly submerged and headed back for Gibraltar, a thousand miles away. And Jerry Wright's troubles had promptly begun. He learned to his dismay that in addition to all the many drawbacks he knew submarines had, a submarine submerged had for him now an additional one—there was absolutely no place to go to get away from his very important passenger.

For General Giraud turned out to be a nightmare. Once he was aboard, still dripping he turned to on Jerry with the astounding assertion that he would immediately take overall command of the invading forces, superseding Eisenhower. And as if that were not enough, he followed it up with the disclosure of his own plan—the carefully prepared invasion of North Africa must be abandoned. Instead he would lead the troops to victory and glory by diverting them northward and invading southern France!

Jerry Wright's diplomatic suggestions that all this was impossible, that Giraud misunderstood what his part was, that a plan for which men and ships had been trained for months could not be cast aside on the spur of the moment for another for which there was neither training nor preparation, that the ships were all at sea nearing their prepared assault beaches and could not possibly be diverted—all this was brushed aside by Giraud as of no importance. He was General Giraud, he was like Joffre, his honor would not allow his serving in a subordinate position to Eisenhower, to anybody. He would take supreme command, he would lead the invasion to glory through southern France. Napoleon had done just that on his return from Elba. But that Hitler and the Nazis were not the weak Louis XVIII and his unstable royalist supporters, and that the unarmed French civil populace had little inclination left to rise with flails, scythes, and sickles to face Stukas and tanks in the hands of their conquerors, seems not to have occurred to Giraud.

Hour after hour as the submarine swam southward, Giraud

dinned his projects into poor Jerry's ears, demanding his assistance, following him into the torpedo room forward, the motor room aft, every one of the few compartments in between as Jerry Wright sought refuge from *l'honneur, mon prestige, l'invasion de la France tout de suite!* Had there been a solitary torpedo tube on the *P 219* empty of its torpedo, I have little doubt Jerry would have crawled into it and slammed its heavy bronze door to behind him to escape Giraud's incessant demands on him. But there was no escape.

Two days and nights of this Jerry Wright had to stand as the *P 219*, sometimes submerged, sometimes on the surface ready for a crash dive if danger appeared, headed southward through the Mediterranean for Gibraltar. Then on the third morning, November 7, the day before D-day, came blessed release. A British Catalina, a flying boat, made contact with them at sea well off the Spanish coast, to take Giraud off and fly him the rest of the way to Gibraltar for his rendezvous with Eisenhower and his briefing for his pre-arranged part in the imminent landings.

"I tell you, Ellsberg, I certainly felt sorry for Ike when I finally got Giraud aboard that Catalina and in the air headed for Gib," concluded Jerry. "My conscience hurts yet."

I nodded sympathetically, but not overly impressed. Giraud was nothing. Eisenhower had had plenty of trouble with Giraud, who had failed miserably in his part of the invasion plan, even after cold logic, Ike's persuasions, and rapidly moving circumstance had forced Giraud into reluctant acquiescence and the abandonment of his preposterous demands. But wait till Ike had to deal with de Gaulle, whom I had seen in the Middle East. Giraud then would seem to Ike the acme of rational and complaisant Frenchmen.

Leaving Jerry Wright, I had a brief interlude before I resumed my round of military calls. There was to be a special ceremony that morning in the heart of Algiers in joint tribute to all-American, British, and French—who had lost their lives assaulting or defending North Africa three weeks before. I hurried down the hill to the little terraced plaza in the center of the business district where stood the *Monument aux Morts*, a modest cenotaph.

Shortly there was martial music, and small detachments of British, French, and American troops filled what space there was on the

lower terraces. Then Darlan, Eisenhower, and Cunningham personally one by one laid wreaths at the base of the cenotaph, there was a moment of respectful silence, and the brief ceremony was over.

I gazed with great interest at the four major figures in this scene, for Giraud stood with the other three, though to Darlan, not to him, went the honor of representing France in this tribute to her fallen sons and those of her new allies. Taller than any of the others, General Giraud was also by far the most impressive military figure, a fact more striking as he stood in simple uniform wholly without any decorations or ribbons—these he refused to wear till once again he could parade down the streets of Metz.

But it was Darlan, rather than Giraud, who held my attention. Admiral Darlan was the reason for the storm of abuse both in America and Britain which was swirling round Eisenhower's head. There was Darlan, short, stocky, bull-dog faced, impassive, the very antithesis of Giraud in everything. It was perhaps no accident that Eisenhower and Cunningham stood between the two of them, as all four faced the *Monument aux Morts*, for these two Frenchmen had nothing in common. Yet Eisenhower had to deal with both to make his campaign a success. If he were not to risk losing his command he must placate idealistic American and British public opinion which thought it saw in Giraud something of the soul of France. And if he were to avoid the certainty of military disaster which would result if all French North Africa fought him or surreptitiously sabotaged his efforts instead of co-operating wholeheartedly, he *must* deal with Darlan, who was the only Frenchman to whose orders any other Frenchman in North Africa—soldier, sailor, or civilian—paid attention. Nobody in Algeria or Morocco had listened to Giraud's impassioned appeals on D-day or afterwards, not a gun had ceased firing. But when unimpressive Darlan had issued the order to quit fighting and to co-operate, not another shot was fired. And the French were co-operating.

There stood Darlan, a very devil in the eyes of American and British public opinion. Was he? Or was he as patriotic a Frenchman as Giraud? Enigmatic, inscrutable of countenance, he laid his wreath in tribute to Americans, British, and French alike, and

stepped back impassively. I could imagine with what dramatic fervor Giraud at the other end of the quartet would have deposited that wreath at the base of the *Monument aux Morts*. It would have been a lend-lease reverse of "Lafayette, we are here!" But if it had not been for Eisenhower's swift comprehension of realities and his quick agreement with Darlan, there would have been vastly more mothers in America, in Britain, and in France also, who would have paid for the privilege of having Giraud lay the wreath instead of Darlan by having their sons also honored at the Monument to the Dead that morning of December 2, 1942.

9

BACK IN ORAN BY EARLY EVENING,

I was once more billeted in the Grand Hotel, this time with more permanence. The eastward hegira of the army and the resultant overcrowding at Algiers had had at least one good result—it had eased the pressure on quarters in Oran. I drew a room by myself, a rather ancient, unheated and depressing room. Compared to the cabin I might have had if afloat, it was terrible. But compared to what I saw the G.I.s up against on my trip in from Tafaraoui Airfield, that room, any room with a roof and a floor, was heaven itself. By the thousands, I saw G.I. pup-tents set up in fields of mud (there weren't any other kind of fields about) with the men half mired in it, nothing to sleep on save cold, clammy mud, and nothing to shield them from the nightly near-freezing rain except a flimsy bit of canvas. Why they didn't all die of pneumonia, I was never able to figure out. Vividly I recalled the cynical retort of a battlewise infantry general just after World War I to a flying officer enthusiastically expounding war in the future,

"The next war may start in the air as you say, but it will end just where all other wars have—in the mud!"

Well, the next war, a quarter of a century later, was here now. As prophesied, it had started in the air, all right, over Pearl Harbor; now it was being fought out true to form in the African mud.

December 3 I saw Oran harbor.

Oran itself stands on a wide plateau a few hundred feet above the sea. The harbor area is a long narrow strip of low ground beneath the city, reached only by a sharply sloping wide road carved into the rocky face of the plateau. The harbor is flanked at the

eastern end (its entrance) by a precipitous cliff on which stands the Ravin Blanc Battery, and is flanked on the western end (or head end) by another eminence carrying Fort Lamoune. Between these two forts, the harbor runs east and west, a rather narrow rectangle about a mile and a half in length. Except one pier at the head of the harbor, all the piers lie to the southerly or landward side, and a massive stone breakwater forms the northerly or Mediterranean side. The harbor has only one opening to the sea, that at its eastern end, directly under the guns of Ravin Blanc Battery, a naval battery, and hardly a quarter of a mile from them—point-blank range, in fact.

About three miles to the westward of the commercial harbor of Oran, lies the separate French naval harbor of Mers-el-Kebir, with a towering rock, the highest in the vicinity, crowned by the formidable Du Santon Battery, commanding all the sea approaches to Oran and Mers-el-Kebir.

I felt sick when I got my first glimpse of Oran harbor from the heights above, and sicker yet when I got a close range look first from a jeep and later from a small boat.

There were twenty-seven French wrecks littering the harbor. Masts and stacks at crazy angles broke the surface of the harbor waters wherever one's eyes lighted—in most cases, the hulls, whether right side up, upside down, or on their sides, were wholly submerged and invisible. A string of masts and smokestacks lay across the entrance to the inner harbor. There six ships, anchored in two lines nearly bow to stern, had been scuttled to block the port. Inside these were sunken destroyers, sunken submarines, sunken freighters, sunken passenger ships, sunken drydocks. Everything in the port had been scuttled before the surrender—across the entrance, in the fairways, alongside the quays—wherever in the opinion of the French naval commandant at Oran they would cause us the most trouble in reopening the port.

And as a sad reminder that the taking of Oran had had nothing of "friendliness" about it, torn fragments of the blasted hulls of two British men-of-war protruded slightly above the surface, one just inside the inner entrance, the other very near the head of the harbor. Inside those battered hulls still lay the mangled bodies of

some four hundred men, mostly Americans, who had all died within a few minutes in the taking of Oran. With these two added wrecks, *H.M.S. Walney* and *H.M.S. Hartland*, the score was complete. Twenty-nine hulks lay inside Oran harbor—twenty-seven French, two British.

Ironically enough, *H.M.S. Walney* and *Hartland* and the special assault forces they were jammed with, had been shot to pieces in the initial assault in a desperate attempt to prevent the very damage I now saw. It had been their mission to seize the harbor and its covering forts before the main troop landings around Oran, and thus prevent any sabotage at all. Instead, they had become the first two of all the wrecks littering the floor of Oran harbor. And on their decks had taken place the worst slaughter in the attacks anywhere from Casablanca to Algiers—as many men in fact had been killed in those two little ships as in all the other fighting on all the other fronts together in the taking of North Africa.

The *Walney* and the *Hartland*, two small British men-of-war of about the tonnage of large destroyers, wholly unarmored, carrying only one five-inch gun apiece and a few smaller guns, had sailed together from England under the command of Captain F. T. Peters, Royal Navy. At Gibraltar they had taken aboard their American forces. These consisted of a specially trained battalion of our 1st Armored Division, some 400 men, under Lt. Col. G. C. Marshall; and about 30 of our bluejackets and marines under Lt. Comdr. G. D. Dickey. Aside from these, there was also aboard the *Walney* a British Commando unit of about 50 men. Including the British crews of the *Walney* and *Hartland*, there were roughly 700 men all told in this venture; somewhat over half were Americans.

The plan was that shortly after H-hour and before the main troop landings had alerted the French, *Walney* and *Hartland*, hidden in the darkness, were to crash through the booms forming the wartime harbor gate. Then *Walney*, the leader, carrying 200 American troops, part of the American naval contingent, and the 50 British Commandos, was to run the entire length of the harbor to its head, lay alongside the pier there, the Môle Centre, and discharge her assault troops. These were to capture Fort Lamoune which commanded the head of the harbor.

Meanwhile *Hartland*, following *Walney* through the gap in the broken boom, was to go only a short distance into the inner harbor, then turn sharply to port, lay herself alongside the first pier, the Môle Ravin Blanc, and there discharge her forces. Her troops, the remaining 200 Americans, were to scale the high cliff immediately behind and capture Ravin Blanc Battery surmounting it. During all this, the naval parties on both *Walney* and *Hartland* were to board all merchantmen at the various piers and prevent any scuttlings.

The desperate nature of this venture was clearly recognized. It had no chance of success unless complete surprise were effected and the vessels could crash through the booms into the inner harbor and get alongside the piers before the French came to and manned their guns. After that, scaling the heights in the darkness to take Ravin Blanc Battery, which certainly would by then be alerted, was still a highly dubious gamble. Rear Admiral A. C. Bennett, U.S.N., destined to be the naval commander in Oran after its capture, protested most vigorously against this plan, but was overruled. The stakes were high, the attempt was ordered. The only effect of Bennett's protest was, so far as the American naval officers on the *Hartland* interpreted it, to obtain an understanding that if the essential element of complete surprise were lost, the ships would withdraw without attempting to enter.

So matters stood on the night of November 7, when a little after midnight *Walney* and *Hartland*, jammed with their landing forces, took station at sea in the darkness a few miles off blacked-out Oran, waiting for 3 A.M.,¹ the designated moment for their assault. Farther out, shrouded in the night, lay a powerful British naval force under Commodore Thomas Troubridge, R.N.—the battleship *Rodney* with nine 16-inch guns, the aircraft carrier *Furious*, the light cruisers *Aurora* and *Jamaica*, and thirty-one other assorted warships from destroyers to mine-sweepers. These were to shield the transports steaming on through the darkness toward their landing beaches twenty-five miles eastward and thirteen miles westward respectively of Oran, where far from the heavy guns of the naval batteries at Oran, the main troop landings were to start at 1 A.M., H-hour.

Three a.m. came. In the darkness far to the east and to the west

of Oran, landing craft were already disembarking the first wave on the beaches, but around Oran itself all was still quiet and undisturbed. With *Walney* leading, Captain Peters started for the entrance, his own two ships completely blacked out and working hastily up to full speed for maximum impact when crashing the boom. As they straightened away for the entrance gate, they heard air raid sirens beginning to scream in Oran. Apparently the news of the landings on the distant beachheads had just reached Oran—it was being alerted. But there was no sign that they had themselves been detected. They stood on, swiftly gathering speed.

Then Captain Peters, peering from the *Walney*'s bridge into the darkness at the breakwaters starting to loom up through the night in the water ahead of him, saw to his dismay that he had misjudged his approach. He was too close inshore and would miss the entrance gate by perhaps a quarter of a mile. He dared not slow and make an oblique approach—he must hit that boom squarely and at full speed if he were to smash through and not hang up in it. He had but one option: he must make a 360° circle at full speed and come back better lined up for the impact. With no slacking of speed, hard right went the *Walney*'s rudder. She heeled sharply to the turn, her stern began to skid sidewise through the water, creating a wide wake. Close behind her, the *Hartland* had no choice but to turn and follow, still further widening that fatal wake which was glowing now through the darkness in brilliant phosphorescence where only the black waters of the Mediterranean had been a moment before.

That widespread phosphorescence, suddenly illuminating the sea almost beneath their eyes, was enough for the surprised naval garrison of Battery *Ravin Blanc*, a moment before alerted by the air raid sirens. They had till then no reason to suspect danger from the sea in front of them. The sky above was the natural danger area when the air raid sirens gave an alarm, but as yet no sign of planes or sounds of engines in the sky had reached them.

Now, however, beneath them and a little beyond the harbor entrance was that startling glow in the water. Instantly a searchlight switched on, trained on the gleaming wake, followed along it naturally enough to its source, and the *Walney* swiftly stood fully

revealed in the searchlight beam. All chance of surprise was gone!

Instantly the 130-millimeter guns of Battery *Ravin Blanc* opened up. But though the range was short for naval guns, hitting a target changing deflection as rapidly as does a ship in a hard turn, is next to impossible. Not a shell landed on the *Walney*, which as yet had completed only a quarter of her circle. Still at full speed, she continued turning to starboard.

Behind her steamed the *Hartland*, uncaught by the searchlights concentrating on her sister, unmolested by gunfire. To the American officers on the *Hartland*, following the *Walney* in her turn, watching the exploding French shells sending up geysers close aboard her, the show was over. Surprise was gone. As soon as the *Walney* had finished a half turn, she would head out to sea away from Oran, zigzagging then, of course, to dodge shells and hoping for luck in eluding them. And they, zigzagging also, would follow her out to sea as prearranged if surprise were lost. The anti-sabotage problem of Oran harbor would have to be left now to the heavy naval forces placed well at sea about it but out of sight in the darkness, and to the Army now landing in force some distance away on both sides.

Still under fire, still illuminated by the searchlights, the badly heeled over *Walney* finished her half turn away from Oran. But if there was no longer any surprise left in the situation for the alarmed French, there still was a sharp surprise remaining for the Americans watching from the *Hartland*. Instead of beginning to straighten up as would be normal on the *Walney* as she eased her rudder to stand straight out to sea away from Oran, she continued heeling to port as much as ever, kept turning in as tight a circle as before. In another moment her intention was clear. Surprise or no surprise, Captain Peters on the *Walney* was completing a full circle, still clearly bent on crashing the boom into Oran harbor!

Astounded by this change from the plan as they understood it, both Col. Marshall and Comdr. Dickey watched the *Walney* come full circle, and still followed by the *Hartland*, straighten away at full speed for the boom close ahead. Captain Peters was going to crash into Oran harbor with every gun there, every searchlight, every warship inside, ready and waiting now for his two little ships.

History was repeating itself. As at Balaklava nearly a century before, someone was blundering into an even more suicidal charge, and another commander was leading 700 men this time instead of 600 into the point-blank fire of unnumbered naval guns. It was going to be murder.

Helped by stray light from the searchlight beams centering on her, which to a degree also illuminated nearby objects, the *Walney* on this approach correctly located the boom, smashed squarely into it, broke through, and then with no loss of speed, hit and broke through a second barrier composed of a string of barges. But with this success, the *Walney*'s luck ran out. From then on, she must travel practically a straight course down the narrow harbor, a perfect target. No more circling, no zigzagging to avoid enemy fire was possible. Now came hell itself.

The guns of Battery Ravin Blanc above, at a range of 500 yards only, began to register on their target. For a quarter of a mile, the *Walney* took this, came then opposite the Môle Ravin Blanc. Between this môle and the Môle Millerand next beyond, two French submarines lay moored, the *Cérès* and the *Pallas*. The instant the *Walney* cleared the end of Môle Ravin Blanc, exposing her port side to them, these two submarines at a range of 200 yards only opened on her with machine guns and their 75-mm. A.A. guns—so short a range that nothing could miss.

Still the *Walney* staggered on up the harbor, helped a little now by the fact that the guns and searchlights of Ravin Blanc had at last discovered the *Hartland* and shifted fire to her. As a further blessing, the outer end of Môle Millerand now coming abeam to port, interposed to shield her from the hail of bullets and shells streaming from the *Cérès* and the *Pallas*.

Then came a crushing misfortune. Close ahead, from the *Walney*'s bridge was made out a large French destroyer, of all things in that harbor that was supposed to be taken by surprise, already underway and standing for them! In desperation, the *Walney* swung sharply to starboard in an attempt to ram her, but at this instant, shells from no one knew which of their many enemies, shot away their bridge and ruined the maneuver.

At a range not exceeding 100 feet, that destroyer as she passed

abreast of them let go with full broadsides from her five 138-mm. guns. If the range had been a little greater so the French guns might have struck lower at full depression, they would have torn the ill-fated *Walney* to pieces on the spot. As it was, those broadsides, raking her decks and topsides, spelled *finis* to any chance now of landing enough men alive to assault anything.

The French destroyer, not daring to stop or back in such close waters, drew astern of them, while the doomed *Walney*, steering now by emergency wheel, kept doggedly on for her objective, the Môle Centre only 300 yards ahead. At that instant a shell, probably from the destroyer astern, exploded in her boiler room and deprived her of all further power for her propeller.

A completely helpless wreck, under only what momentum she still had, the *Walney* slowly drifted onward for the right side of Môle Centre, her planned disembarkation point. But lest the measure of disaster to the *Walney* be not already full, pressed down, and running over, along that side of the Môle Centre, one ahead of the other, lay two more large French destroyers, *Épervier* and *Tramontane*! Both now opened up with everything they had, five 138-mm. guns, four 130-mm. guns, their machine-guns, even their A.A. guns, on the helpless target literally drifting right up to the muzzles of their guns. Nothing missed, nothing could miss.

With her decks heaped high with the dead and her compartments below a shambles, the remains of the *Walney*, disintegrating in an inferno of bursting shells, drifted lazily onward to collide gently broadside to broadside against the first of the two French warships which was firing into her now at no range at all. She had arrived at last at her objective at Môle Centre.

A handful of survivors managed to leap from the shell-swept deck of the *Walney* to the destroyer at the moment of impact, there to be taken prisoner immediately. Before more could jump, the *Walney* bounced off, drifted a little clear. Whoever else could still move, leaped overboard to try to swim to the nearby quays. Soon thereafter a sharp explosion tore what was left of the *Walney* apart, she capsized and went down, carrying with her both the dead and the dying. Three-quarters of all those aboard, when she had crashed

the boom at the harbor entrance a few minutes before, were casualties, soldiers and sailors alike, most of them dead now inside the sunken hulk off the Môle Centre, hard by the walls of that Fort Lamoune they were to have captured. The remnant, all unarmed swimmers who had made the quays, were themselves captives.

Meanwhile her consort, the *Hartland*, was having no better luck. Traveling 600 yards astern of the *Walney*, she had initially escaped detection by the searchlights, both in the turn outside the harbor and in the approach which followed. But she paid for her immunity. The stray light of the searchlight beams centered on the *Walney* which had dimly outlined the harbor entrance jetties for her, was not there to mark them when the *Hartland* steamed up. Having made the 360° turn not quite so tightly as had the *Walney*, she was a little further shoreward. Instead of coming through the gap which the *Walney* had left in the barriers, she missed in the darkness and her bow ran up on the sloping jetty forming the inshore side of the entrance and hung there.

Backing furiously to get clear, the *Hartland* churned up so violently the phosphorescent waters of the Mediterranean that she instantly attracted attention from the heights above. A searchlight swung inquisitively in her direction, picked her up as she managed to pull free. Leaving the doomed *Walney* to the warships below, all the guns and searchlights of Battery *Ravin Blanc* immediately shifted from the *Walney* to the *Hartland*.

In a perfect hell of fire from the French gunners who had by now got their hands in tuning up on the *Walney*, the *Hartland* came on again for the entrance, cleared it this time. She had only a quarter of a mile further to go to turn in alongside the Môle *Ravin Blanc*, the landing point for her assault forces, most of whom were stowed in the compartments below to shield them as well as possible to the last moment.

But it was a terrible quarter of a mile. Before they could fire more than three shots in their own defense, bursting shells from above had wiped out all of *Hartland's* gun crews and silenced her return fire. Still she kept on, came abeam the head of Môle *Ravin Blanc*, turned to port to berth herself there, port side to.

Immediately she cleared the head of the môle, the two submarines, the *Cérès* and the *Pallas*, which had previously riddled the *Walney*, opened on her, much closer aboard than they ever had been to her sister. The *Hartland* had not even a machine-gun left in action with which to answer.

As if this were not enough, the same evil luck which the *Walney* had encountered at the Môle Centre, now fell on the *Hartland*. Alongside the Môle Ravin Blanc, at the very spot where the *Hartland* was to unload, lay another large French destroyer, the *Typhon*, which, for whatever reasons, had not fired a shot at the *Walney* as she went by. But to make up for that omission, she was more than ready now, and there was the defenseless *Hartland* only a few hundred feet away. A perfect torrent of 130-mm. shells poured from the merciless guns of the *Typhon* to burst inside the unarmored *Hartland*. Immediately the *Hartland* lost all boiler power, all steering control, and was set heavily on fire below.

Completely helpless, the battered *Hartland* started slowly to drift broadside away from the Môle Ravin Blanc toward the Môle Millerand. All the while the *Typhon* poured shells into her till the *Hartland* had drifted a few hundred yards. Then the *Typhon* had to cease fire lest some of her shells, going clear through the *Hartland*'s thin sides without exploding, should strike other French ships now in line beyond.

But this did the *Hartland* slight good. She was already a raging furnace below. The assault troops packed into the compartments there (those still alive, that is) were driven to the decks above to escape roasting. And as they came on deck, the machine-guns of the *Pallas* and the *Cérès*, very close aboard now, cut them down.

Afire below, her topsides blazing, with incessant streams of machine-gun bullets sweeping her decks, there was no longer the slightest hope for the *Hartland* or her mission. Half those aboard were already dead. Those still able to, heroically pausing under heavy fire to put life jackets on the wounded, first pushed them overboard and then followed themselves, to swim to the adjacent quays where they were promptly taken prisoner as they hauled themselves or the wounded from the luridly illuminated waters.

The *Hartland*, manned now only by the dead, continued to burn fiercely till a terrific explosion tore her apart, scattering her steel plates over the near by quays. What was left sank to join her sister, the *Walney*, on the bottom of Oran harbor.

The assault was over. More than four hundred men had died in vain.

C H A P T E R

10

Huddled out of the cold rain in a miserable shack knocked together from such stray dunnage boards as they had been able to gather on the quay, near the head of Môle Ravin Blanc I found the quarters of the little American naval salvage party which had entered Oran on its surrender November 10th. I introduced myself.

Lieutenant George Ankers, U.S.N.R., the senior officer, was in charge of twelve American divers and mechanics, two ensigns as his assistants, and another homeless officer, Lieutenant William Reitzel, U.S.N.R., whose original invasion task had apparently evaporated.

From Lieutenant Ankers (and later from Lt. Comdr. E. White, R.N.V.R., the displaced British salvage officer whom Admiral Cunningham had mentioned to me) I pieced together the tangled local salvage command situation which I had been ordered to rectify immediately.

Ankers, a giant of a man whom I soon learned to respect as a very competent salvage officer, had been taken from the wrecks at Pearl Harbor for this invasion. To help him, he had been assigned a small group of divers of whom two were good, and the two ensigns, Victor Aldrich and Leo Brown, both experienced ex-warrant officers. This little group had trained together at Rosneath, Scotland, before their departure for North Africa, the idea being apparently that they should cope with what little ship sabotage in Oran harbor occurred after its seizure by the *Walney* and the *Hartland*. They had been drilled and equipped for that only, since Ankers himself was given no salvage ship, no salvage equipment

except a few hand tools, and only the diving rigs needed for his men.

Unfortunately, the anti-sabotage assault of the *Walney* and the *Hartland* had been a bloody fiasco. When Ankers and his men entered Oran with the troops of General Fredendall who had forced its surrender on the afternoon of November 10 after two and a half days of hard fighting ashore, they found a sad and completely unanticipated situation. All over the harbor, half-flooded ships and floating drydocks were on their way down, but as yet mostly unsubmerged, scuttled with their sea valves hastily opened by orders of Capitaine de Frégate Duprès, *Commandant du Port d'Oran*. On most of these vessels, nothing at all could be done to keep them afloat, even if Ankers had had several times his actual force, for their opened seacocks were already under water.

But at the one spot which vitally mattered, the situation might yet have been saved. Across the entrance to the inner harbor, from the head of Môle Ravin Blanc to the outer breakwater opposite, six ships had been strung roughly in two parallel lines, one inside the other, and there hurriedly scuttled to block the port. However, so hastily and unprofessionally had the job been done that only a few valves had been opened on any of these ships. As a result, they flooded and went down slowly. Several, with one end or the other already resting on the bottom, still had their bows or sterns afloat, which buoyant ends were flooding even more slowly.

This gave a heaven-sent opportunity to frustrate the French intention. There was still time to lash to these still floating ends, let the ships pivot on their sunken opposite ends, and turn the wrecks 90° to the right or left to leave a clear and unobstructed channel through between them, wide enough for ships of any size to enter or leave Oran.

Lieutenant Ankers saw this, of course, but he was helpless. He had no salvage ship. If he had had rank enough to carry any weight, he might have commandeered some of the British naval mine-sweepers outside Oran and done the job with them, for he knew how. But with two stripes only, his chance of commandeering anything, even a rowboat, was nil. And every vessel outside Oran was busily engaged in a preassigned task. Ankers had neither the

rank nor the prestige which might have persuaded the mass of generals and admirals, both American and British, about Oran to break a suitable vessel away from its task and give it to him.

Apparently a message was sent to Admiral Cunningham, at that time with General Eisenhower at invasion headquarters at Gibraltar 220 miles away, indicating the situation and asking a salvage ship to clear the entrance. Admiral Cunningham instantly dispatched the *King Salvor*, then stationed at Gibraltar, with Lt. Comdr. White, R.N.V.R., its salvage officer, to Oran. It took the *King Salvor* eighteen hours, steaming hard, to get there. Meanwhile the golden opportunity was steadily dissolving in the sea rising about the sinking ships.

The arrival of the *King Salvor* unfortunately only muddled further an already very muddled salvage situation. She carried no divers of her own, and without them was handicapped in handling the situation which was now desperate and requiring instant action if anything at all was to be achieved before it was too late.

Ankers, the American lieutenant, had divers but no salvage ship. White, the British lieutenant commander, had a salvage ship but no divers. Which should take charge of everything? Ankers, who had been sent initially as the salvage officer for Oran but without proper equipment for the task as it stood, or White, sent there later on an emergency mission but lacking badly needed divers in his crew? They could not agree; each felt his instructions empowered him to take full charge.

While White was senior, the difference was not enough of itself to settle the matter. For mere seniority in no service of itself entitles a newcomer to take over from a junior in rank a task assigned the junior unless his orders unequivocally so require and state. White's orders, probably oral, were of necessity only general. To make matters worse, the two disagreed radically as to how the job should be tackled, though I have myself little doubt that either, if given everything and left alone, would have made a success of his plan even at that eleventh hour.

As a final touch to complete this tangled situation, Commodore Troubridge, R.N., commanded all naval vessels (all of which were British) engaged in the Oran operations, and undoubtedly the

King Salvador came under him. Rear Admiral Bennett, U.S.N., was to be Flag-Officer-in-Charge, Oran, once it was taken, and undoubtedly Oran was now taken. But Bennett had no vessels whatever under his command, and, though senior to Troubridge, no control over the forces afloat. Whether an appeal by either Ankers or White to their respective seniors would have *swiftly* resolved the situation is unknown. It might have, and of course it should have. But neither Bennett ashore nor Troubridge afloat could be reached quickly in the confusion reigning around Oran.

What actually happened I don't fully know yet. Ankers wanted to hook on to one vessel first; White preferred another. More time was lost. Ankers apparently took the bull by the horns and with his men secured hawsers to his choice, the barely visible bow of the not yet quite wholly submerged *Boudjmel*, a vessel in the inner row of blockships. White, apparently left with no other choice, heaved on the hawsers with the *King Salvador*, and between the two of them, they swung and dragged the *Boudjmel* on her already submerged stern before she sank altogether on them, enough to uncover a partial opening in the outer line of sunken ships between the bow of the *Spahi* and the stern of the *Pigeon* sunk just ahead of the *Spahi*.

But by the time that was achieved, there was no longer any chance of anything further. The *Spahi* on the removal of the *Boudjmel* became the cork in the harbor bottleneck. For a long time she had been partly afloat but meanwhile she had rolled to starboard and gone down completely, lying on her side—the worst position possible for future salvage. And with the complete sinking of the *Spahi* ended all chance of clearing the harbor entrance without extended salvage operations.

The sequel was what might have been expected. When matters in Oran had settled enough to give opportunity, both salvage officers complained to their respective seniors of the unsatisfactory command situation still existing. Admiral Bennett's Chief of Staff, Captain Spellman, outraged by what might have been accomplished but wasn't, took matters into his own hands and without reference to the British higher command, ordered White out of the *King Salvador*, putting everything in Ankers' hands, a procedure which in

the overall international command picture was bound to have repercussions and did.

And there I was with peremptory orders to put White back on the *King Salvor* as salvage officer and take Ankers out. The orders admitted of no dispute by anybody—Admiral Cunningham was Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief to whom everybody in anybody's navy, British, American, or French, afloat or ashore in North Africa, was subordinate. And the orders were in themselves wholly reasonable. If a British naval commander had ordered an American officer out of his ship without approval higher up, he also would certainly have been reversed.

But all this did me little good. Orders may be orders and in the naval service must be obeyed, but if I were ever to open Oran harbor with next to nothing to do the job, I had to have everybody's good will and co-operation—Army and Navy, whether British or American. For only God knew to which of these diverse forces I should continuously have to appeal (I couldn't command them) for every little thing in the way of men, materials, and equipment I might have to improvise into salvage gear.

I couldn't begin by antagonizing the American admiral commanding the port, nor his Chief of Staff. Still less would I get anywhere by antagonizing the British vice admiral afloat who had succeeded Commodore Troubridge in that area. And of course if I failed to satisfy Admiral Cunningham in the matter, I had no further worries at all—I should promptly be on my way home in disgrace. I was in considerable of a dilemma. Whose toes had best be trodden on and still give me a chance for success in Oran and later all over the Mediterranean?

Everybody's feelings were on edge. White was deeply incensed over his removal. The local British admiral afloat and the overall naval commander in Algiers felt the Royal Navy had been insulted. Admiral Bennett and his Chief of Staff, Captain Spellman, felt strongly that the local situation had warranted the summary action taken. I, as the designated executioner, felt worse than any of them. Whatever I did or didn't do spelled trouble which would ruin my mission in Oran. Only Lieutenant Ankers, whom I had orders to fling off the *King Salvor*, seemed to see nothing either

personal or national at stake and appeared unconcerned over what I did about him.

A few days spent cautiously feeling out this tempest in a teapot and getting at first hand some knowledge of the personalities involved, only made the situation seem more hopeless. I had to have the wholehearted co-operation of both White and Ankers, for they were the only two experienced salvage officers available to help cover a thousand miles along the Barbary coast. Restoring White might be a way out, for it would mollify White and not enrage Ankers, regardless of how much it angered the American higher command in Oran. And of course it would save my official neck.

But while it seemed that Ankers himself would take no offense if I took him off the *King Salvor*, there were his American divers, the only ones at hand. It was certain that they would take considerable offense if ordered now to serve under White, the British salvage officer. Long experience with divers had taught me plenty. On the surface, disgruntled seamen can be made to do something at least under fear of punishment. But not divers. They work unseen and alone. Success with divers depends wholly on their willingness and desire to risk their lives inside wrecks, solving the problems they encounter by feel in the black waters amidst unseeable and unknown entanglements likely to trap them. Of these the salvage officer on the surface knows nothing at first, and later knows only what the diver on coming up chooses to tell him of what he has learned and what he has done, if anything.

The result is that a salvage officer for whom his divers are not willing to gamble their lives, not only gets nowhere but he has no means of doing anything about it. That salvage task is simply added to the long list of previous salvage failures.

Such was the situation in Oran. Of everybody from Admiral Cunningham down, the last individuals I could afford to antagonize were a few American enlisted men, the divers, if vitally needed Oran harbor were soon to be of any good to General Eisenhower and his fighting troops. Admiral Cunningham, a four-star admiral, had gold lace on his sleeves reaching from his wrists to his elbows and could chop my official head off with a word, but still what

worried me most was not what he thought but what a few common seamen thought, though they could do nothing to me officially.

After a few days' study on the spot, I found a solution which when presented to Admiral Cunningham he heartily approved and immediately acted on. An order was issued by Allied Naval Headquarters, and given wide public notice in Oran, restoring Lt. Comdr. E. White, R.N.V.R., to his position as Salvage Officer on *H.M.S.V. King Salvor*. This took care of the honor and dignity of the Royal Navy. Then Lt. Comdr. White, together with the *King Salvor*, was ordered to leave for Bône, the Algerian port nearest Tunisia, and only some forty miles short of the actual fighting line. Bône was getting a terrific nightly bombardment from Axis bombers with fields only twenty minutes' flying time away. Already half a dozen ships had been sunk inside its harbor, badly needing attention. Two thousand Axis bombs fell on Bône within a period of seven weeks. White was radiant over his assignment to Bône—it was certainly the post of honor in the campaign. That took care of White.

However, the *King Salvor* was still badly needed at Oran, for without her and her equipment there was little chance of handling the situation in that harbor. Therefore White departed immediately for Bône without his salvage ship, which was not to join him in Bône till some time later. The *King Salvor* was ordered to remain in Oran temporarily till the harbor was fully cleared, meanwhile to work there with Lt. Ankers as salvage officer and with his divers. Since that physically preserved the status quo in Oran, it satisfied the divers, Lt. Ankers, and the American higher command in Oran.

Since everyone now seemed satisfied, I was left free to turn my attention to getting along with the war.

C H A P T E R

11

T

HREE WAYS LEFT FOR THE MOMENT

only the problem of what to do about Oran harbor. I had now to work with, a British salvage ship, an American salvage officer and some divers, and, oddly enough, a French salvage officer and some French divers also.

I found soon after my arrival in Oran that the French contingent was going to be of little immediate value to me. Having been cut off by the Axis from access to the world since the Fall of France, they were meagerly equipped and their diving suits were so worn out, with patches now being patched in pathetic attempts to keep them watertight, that it was amazing men could still be persuaded to risk their lives in them. And at the moment I had no extra diving suits at all to give them.

But what really concerned me over my new French assistants and allies was not so much their lack of decent diving equipment as their totally incomprehensible point of view. I knew, of course, that in North Africa, the French whom recently we had been fighting, were now not conquered enemies who must take our orders as the Italians in Massawa lately had to do, but our allies. As our allies now, the French admiral lately in command of Oran and that Capitaine de Frégate Duprès were still in their previous posts even though it was under their sole orders (both Darlan and Pétain stoutly disclaimed ever having ordered it) that Oran harbor had been thoroughly sabotaged. And every man and officer in the French Navy around Oran was still responsible directly to them. If those two Frenchmen had in any way changed their ideas since sabotaging the harbor on their own initiative, nothing I ever saw

indicated any sign of it.

Now I found to my astonishment I was in the midst of a regular Alice-in-Wonderland situation. If it seemed plain as day to me (as it did to General Eisenhower and to Admiral Cunningham who had sent me there) that the first order of business was fully to open Oran harbor, and the second to restore the harbor facilities, that wasn't the way the French high command in Oran saw it. Not at all.

Without any thought to the future they had deprived themselves of all their warships, first by sending out their destroyers after the *Walney-Hartland* episode, which destroyers Commodore Troubridge's waiting cruisers had thoroughly and swiftly shot to pieces, and then by scuttling all their submarines. Now they found themselves in the peculiar predicament of having not even a rowboat to go to sea in or to hoist an admiral's flag on. That, not the Allied need for the use of Oran harbor, was what seemingly concerned the local French high command deeply.

When Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard, the French salvage officer, a very pleasant, a very studious-looking, and a very eager young man, first reported to me, I received a shock. He informed me that it was the desire of his superiors that I concentrate the American and British salvage forces available in Oran on lifting immediately the French submarines they had recently scuttled!

I stared blankly at Perrin-Trichard. Did he mean it? He did. I soon learned that badinage was far from the thoughts of this very serious lieutenant who, fortunately for me, spoke excellent English. When the situation dawned on me at last, I had difficulty in not insulting him and all France by laughing outright. With a pressing war situation requiring the swiftest possible reopening of the harbor, I was instead to turn to on lifting three scuttled French submarines which even when lifted would take six months or more to refit for any service! It was too ludicrous for words.

As dispassionately as I could, I explained to Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard that much as it broke my heart (for lifting sunken submarines had in my younger days been my forte), the unfortunate submarines *Cérès*, *Pallas*, and *Danaë* must remain submerged for the present on the bottom of Oran harbor while all of us went about more urgent business. First, regrettably for the needs of his

superiors, must come that prosaic scuttled freighter, the *Spahi*, blocking the entrance, and then that even more prosaic huge floating drydock they had also scuttled. Of all things around Oran, what meant most in winning the war in North Africa was the *Spahi* out of the harbor entrance and the return of that huge drydock once again to the surface ready to repair torpedoed ships. He must convey my profound regrets to his superiors, M'sieu l'Amiral and M'sieu le Capitaine de Frégate, his *Commandant du Port*. I could not possibly do what they wished. Woebegone at having to be messenger for such unwelcome news, Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard left me.

He must quickly have concluded I had descended on Oran as his special nemesis, for next day when I got hold of him again I asked him what he and his French divers were then engaged on. His answer nearly floored me. He had been and was still engaged in attempting to raise the capsized French battleship, *la Bretagne*, sunk in Mers-el-Kebir harbor.

La Bretagne? This was the last straw. When Oran harbor was shrieking for attention, he was still engaged in working on that useless heap of junk, that thirty-year-old pre-World War I French battleship lying upside down in Mers-el-Kebir where she was doing no harm. Even if recovered, it would require two years' work and priceless skilled labor and materials badly needed elsewhere to refit *la Bretagne*.

Even if refitted, so ancient was her design it made her practically valueless as a battleship in this war. Her history was tragic. After the Fall of France in 1940, the British, in desperation lest the French warships in Mers-el-Kebir harbor fall into Nazi hands, had appeared in force off Oran and served an ultimatum on the French admiral there. He must either join them and continue the war against the Nazis as de Gaulle was doing, or sail with his warships to the French West Indies for internment, or surrender, or—take the consequences.

The French admiral indignantly rejected all the alternatives offered him. The British opened fire. The French were in no position to fire back. A salvo of 15-inch shells from *H.M.S. Hood*, *Valiant* and *Resolution* had landed on *la Bretagne* and she had

promptly and ingloriously turned turtle and gone down. Which was exactly what that ancient ark could be counted on to do again if anyone ever raised her and put her back in a battle line against modern warships.

So I informed Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard that the lifting of *la Bretagne* must be suspended for the duration. When the war ended, if the French wished to raise and refit her for the next war, they might resume operations. But pending defeat of the Nazis, I would assign him and his men a salvage task that meant something in *this* war. Tomorrow I would let him know his assignment.

Once again, completely hardhearted this time, I gazed into the stricken eyes of Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard. Then, voiceless, he departed as before, to report, I suppose, to M'sieu l'Amiral what that unfeeling Principal Salvage Officer sent by the Naval Commander-in-Chief was about—unswervingly bent on leaving the submerged French Navy submerged.

I was by now, I felt, completely beyond possibility of further shock. So, having settled the British-American imbroglio at about the same time as I polished off *la Bretagne*, I set to work to try to accomplish something constructive. That meant first the *Spahi*.

In a small boat in the harbor entrance, I held a discussion about the *Spahi* with Lieutenant Ankers, with his two best divers, with Lieutenant Reitzel, his assistant, and with Captain Victor Harding, Merchant Navy, skipper of *H.M.S.V. King Salvor*. I learned from Ankers that his two divers, "Red" Gatchell and George Lynch, had already made a fairly thorough diving survey of the inside of the *Spahi* and what they had learned was not very encouraging.

It seemed that the *Spahi*, an ancient French tub of a freighter, had been fully loaded with hogsheads of wine in all holds, fore and aft, and had been about to sail for Marseilles where the wine was to be delivered to the Nazis, when she was instead taken to the harbor entrance and scuttled by opening her sea valves. She had filled slowly, her stern had sunk first, and finally in going down completely, she had rolled on her side and lay now on the bottom, flat on her starboard side. That made it very bad, both for the lifting of her and for the divers working on her.

Gatchell and Lynch, both good divers, had been through her, so

far as conditions permitted. They had already located the opened sea valves and had plugged them (their bonnets had been removed). But so far as they could discover in the murky water below, she had few bulkheads and those were of very doubtful watertightness. The cargo holds were solid with huge wooden hogsheads of wine and were inaccessible to the divers.

Getting around on the half-capsized *Spahi* was exceptionally difficult—her decks were now all vertical instead of horizontal and of course could not be walked on; all her companionway ladders were now horizontal instead of vertical and could not be descended. A diver had a tough time in the black water and the tangled mess of wreckage inside the topsy-turvy *Spahi* with no footing to get about on.

To make matters worse, there were no plans or blueprints available of or in the *Spahi* to tell us anything about her or her interior arrangements. Lieutenant Reitzel who was acting as liaison for the salvage party with the French assured me that this was not because the French were holding anything out on us, but because the vessel was so old her plans had long since disappeared from her files (the divers had searched fruitlessly her chartroom and captain's cabin) and no French shipping office in Oran had any duplicates.

So it appeared that if we wanted to know anything about the *Spahi* we could find out (maybe) by having a diver play blindman's buff inside the murky and opaque water filling her. Submarine lamps were useless; even with them a man could hardly make out his hand in front of his faceplate. The indispensable measurements to figure with some accuracy what buoyancies I might get to refloat her, we could learn only by having divers try to measure her while dangling in the water below at the ends of their lifelines alongside her now vertical decks.

Altogether, the *Spahi* was a very dubious subject for a quick lifting operation. There was no salvage gear for lifting available then in Oran nor to be expected for months yet. It was obvious that if we were to uncork the harbor mouth, the *Spahi*, a mystery ship so far as we were concerned, would have to float herself out of the entrance. I trusted she would oblige. With the dimensions of her which Ankers already had obtained from looking her up in Lloyd's

Register—her length, beam, and depth of hold—I adjourned the conference afloat and we all went ashore to the salvage shack on the quay at Môle Ravin Blanc where I might better do a little rough calculation.

The plan I desired to try involved dividing the ship up into five separate watertight compartments (if we had any luck making her ancient bulkheads, now probably sieves, watertight) blowing compressed air into her hull till we had expelled all water down to the upper edges of her now vertical cargo hatches, and hoping that way to get buoyancy enough in her to float her off the bottom, still lying on her starboard side so she would not spill out all our precious compressed air as she rose. From the dimensions of her which Ankers gave me, and the best guesses I could make of the probable sizes of her cargo hatches, her own weight, and the weight of her cargo, it figured out there might be a fighting chance.

I estimated that about a week's work by all hands in Ankers' party should put us in position to try a lift with compressed air. So Ankers and his men, working off floats moored over the *Spahi*, turned to.

Captain Harding meanwhile started to rig the *King Salvor* for a rather unusual towing job, that of a vessel to be towed while on her side. And Lieutenant Reitzel turned to on raking up all the portable air compressors he could find in Oran, no matter who owned them. We should need a great deal of compressed air.

I left the salvage shack with Lieutenant Reitzel to go back to Oran. It was raining as usual, a cold, dismal rain. Alongside the stone quay near by, the *King Salvor* was moored. A little farther out, a few broken steel plates barely showing above water marked the remains of the *Hartland* and her still entombed dead.

In one way, it wasn't a bad location for that salvage shack quartering Ankers' men. Almost a hop, skip, and a jump from it were wrecks enough, including the *Spahi*, to suit anybody. No diver was ever going to get rich on portal to portal pay going from his bunk to his job.

Lieutenant Reitzel had an ancient, low-slung French roadster, looking like an ex-racing car, which somehow he had finessed for the salvage party. We crawled under its canvas top into the bucket

seats, to find the watersoaked canvas above literally resting on our caps. Reitzel got the contraption underway, quite a tricky accomplishment with everything wet, and we started to drag through the deep mud down Môle Ravin Blanc to a paved road some hundreds of yards away. We made it.

I studied Lieutenant William Reitzel curiously as we went along the waterfront. Working with a salvage party was the last place I might have expected to find an officer of his type—he was slight, somewhere around thirty-five years old, obviously a student, certainly never trained in engineering or mechanics, or for that matter, even in seamanship.

Reitzel, I had learned from Ankers, was a volunteer addition to his salvage party, on a somewhat informal basis. Lieutenant Reitzel had come to North Africa, not for salvage work for which he had no training at all, but as a naval intelligence officer, for which by education and temperament he was extremely well fitted. Oran, after its capture, was an excellent spot for intelligence work, with its intrigues, its communists, its Vichyites, its location close to totalitarian controlled Spain and Spanish Morocco on the one side and to the fighting line on the other, offering splendid opportunity to Nazi espionage agents, far superior to much publicized Tangier or Casablanca. Lieutenant Reitzel, with his exceptional knowledge of French, had turned to whole-heartedly on it on his arrival with the invading forces.

However, through no fault of his own, he had promptly come a cropper. Unfortunately for him, he was in the American Navy, and once Algeria was taken, intelligence work was no longer any part at all, apparently, of our naval interest or function there. All responsibility for intelligence work, of which there was still great need, was left to the British who already had a well-established Mediterranean network, or to our Army which had done the preliminary intelligence work for the invasion (*l'affaire Giraud* was one of its fruits) and was presumably now spreading its system of army agents ashore. In rather blunt terms, Lieutenant Reitzel, U.S.N.R., had been told to forget it and find something else to interest himself in.

That had been quite a blow to Reitzel and he still did not wholly

believe it. With all the intrigue about, to tell a trained intelligence officer that he must take no notice, was, I suppose, like trying to convince a quivering pointer in a stubble field full of quail that it was to do no pointing. At any rate, he had as philosophically as possible looked about Oran at what activities the Navy still had an interest in. He had then volunteered to help Ankers who badly needed help in his contacts with the French, where Reitzel's knowledge of French could be very useful. So there was Lieutenant Reitzel at my side in his shaky French rattletrap roadster (itself in the circumstances concrete proof of his ability to get results), an impromptu salvage officer.

We bumped along a terribly worn-out French pavement fronting the quays, with Reitzel weaving his car cautiously in and out amongst a series of waterfilled potholes, trying to avoid dropping a wheel into one of them. In between potholes, Reitzel told me of what he had learned in his early intelligence work regarding the personalities of the French higher command. In return, I suggested to him leads which might profitably be explored in looking for air compressors—contractors and road builders preferably, though the road we were on gave very little encouragement to the idea that road builders still existed around Oran. Reitzel nodded seriously, taking mental notes.

We came finally to the head of the harbor, like the rest of it studded with sorry looking smokestacks and masts sprouting directly from the water, and swung sharply left toward the steep incline (fortunately with its paving in better condition) leading up the side of the cliff to the city above. To our right lay Fort Lamoune, still French manned; to our left the wide road with heavy streams of trucks, mostly military, ascending or descending and having great difficulty in avoiding skids on the very slippery pavement. It struck me that if the temperature got only a little colder and the never-ceasing rain froze on that slope, Eisenhower would find his army as effectually blocked off by land from Oran harbor as by water owing to the *Spahi*. But perhaps it never actually froze there in the winter—it merely felt as if it were momentarily on the verge of it. Or most likely the trouble lay wholly in my shivering

self—any temperature much less than the 130° or 140° F. of Massawa probably felt near freezing to me.

We managed to get safely up the long slope into the city, where Reitzel deposited me at the Grand Hotel, and circling the *Place de la Bastille*, himself set out in search of air compressors. I pushed my way past the sentries outside to the lobby crowded mainly with army officers, ignored the antediluvian hydraulic elevator which offered a lift service so slow and occasional as to be worthless (no down service was permitted), and climbed three flights of stairs to my unheated room. There, first making sure I was safe from intrusion by locking the door, I cautiously removed from my rain-coat pocket a 60-watt light bulb I had just acquired from Ankers' salvage stores at Môle Ravin Blanc and with a somewhat guilty feeling substituted it for the 25-watt electric bulb which (by courtesy) illuminated my room. I had work to do and needed light enough at least to make out the markings on my slide rule. Then I turned to in earnest on calculating buoyancies on the *Spahi*.

12

MY FIRST WEEK IN ORAN MOVED

briskly along. We had some night air raid alarms and a few bombs but no damage. Evidently the Nazis had enough targets more favorably located closer to their home fields in Tunisia to bother sending major bombing squadrons over Oran. They raided us just enough to keep ack-ack batteries pinned down in Oran which would have caused them more trouble if sent further east. Oran very obviously they intended to take care of in other ways.

The first intimation of this came a few days after my arrival. Into the naval harbor of Mers-el-Kebir limped at slow speed the fast British mine-layer, *H.M.S. Manxman*, with a sizable hole in her port side. She had just been torpedoed by a U-boat off Oran. Fortunately for her, the torpedo must have been making practically a surface run, for the hole was close to her waterline where it did the least damage. Even more fortunately, it was fairly well aft, leaving her vital machinery spaces and engines intact so she could still steam. Evidently the *Manxman's* skipper was the darling of the gods, for an even more astonishing bit of luck had attended her torpedoing. The exploding torpedo had taken the port side mine track and mine passage just above the point of explosion and made hash of them—a smashing jolt which inevitably should have detonated every one of the long string of powerful naval mines stowed on that track, and torn the *Manxman* into shreds. Probably that was why the canny U-boat captain had fired high and aimed at that spot instead of at the normally more inviting machinery spaces farther forward. But the *Manxman* happened to have had not a single mine aboard—she had just laid all her deadly eggs

before returning to Oran! It must have been a very much non-plused U-boat captain who, peering through his periscope, saw the mine-layer *Manxman*, instead of disintegrating as expected, calmly steam off before he could get in another shot!

There wasn't anything we could do for the *Manxman* in Oran—we had no steel plates as yet to patch the hole in her. But she didn't need much. While down a little by the stern from the flooded compartments there, she was still safely afloat. She could steam, and she could go back to England under her own power where permanent repairs could be made. So after we had shored some bulkheads below to make sure they didn't give way on her passage, she departed for home, with every seaman watching her go, hoping that when his turn came, he might be blessed with as much luck.

The *Manxman* gave me cause for plenty of thought. My orders from Admiral Cunningham made me responsible for all ships torpedoed or bombed at sea and needing help, as well as for the harbors. But with what? There was a long coast to cover; I had only the *King Salvador*, a very slow ship, to handle anything with. I made sure that Captain Harding at least kept up enough steam to cast off instantly should he get orders. To my gratification I found my concern was unnecessary. Like a good salvage man, that was exactly what already he was doing—from Andy Duncan, Chief Engineer, to Jock Brown, 4th Engineer, his engine room officers (all Scotch, of course) were ready and rarin' to go.

We had not long to wait. The British vice admiral commanding afloat, with U-boats operating on his doorstep, undertook to meet the menace. He sent immediately to sea a flotilla of British destroyers, all fitted with Asdic, the highly secret British underwater submarine detection device, on a search for what U-boats were lurking off Oran.

A day went by. Then next day, December 10, the searching flotilla found the U-boat, but in an undesired manner. In the late morning I got word that in code, a radio message from the destroyer flotilla commander had been received in Oran:

“*H.M.S. Porcupine* torpedoed port side in engine room, completely disabled and sinking. Position Lat. 36° 05' N., Long. 00° 20' W. Am attempting to take her in tow for Oran.”

Evidently the hunter had become the quarry. Asdic or no Asdic, the U-boat captain had got home the first torpedo, and might well get in more before it was over. With a stricken destroyer to be taken care of by her sisters, the advantage now lay on his side.

In a few minutes I was in the office of the American Port Commandant at the head of the harbor, poring over charts with Captain Ansel, Captain Lewis, and Commander Andrews, all of Admiral Bennett's staff. Hurriedly we plotted the position given. It was almost due north of Cape Carbon to the eastward of us and something over thirty miles by sea from Oran.

I did some hasty mental calculating. A torpedoed destroyer in a seaway could hardly be towed faster than three knots. It would take ten hours yet at that speed to get her to Oran. No destroyer with a torpedo hit in her engine room and reported as sinking was likely to remain afloat ten hours. Was there any port or even any land closer to her than Oran?

There was. About fifteen miles south from the position of the sinking *Porcupine* lay the little harbor of Arzeu, just eastward of Cape Carbon and the closest point of land to her where a destroyer could even be beached. If only she could be kept afloat five hours more, she might make Arzeu. There we had a small naval base subsidiary to Oran and twenty-five miles from it by road.

The problem was to keep the *Porcupine* afloat for that five hours. I grabbed my cap, told Captain Ansel I was on my way to Arzeu overland, the quickest way to get there. I asked him to have Admiral Bennett request the British to order the destroyer towing the *Porcupine* to change course and head for Arzeu—under no conditions to try to make Oran. And finally I asked Ansel to see that the American Base Commander at Arzeu had an MTB (a British Motor Torpedo Boat, similar to our PT's, and very fast) waiting at the quay for me to take me to sea to board the *Porcupine*. Then I dashed down the stairs from the office to the quay below.

Waiting there for me was an army jeep, which Lieutenant Reitzel had the day before persuaded the Army to assign for my personal use as Principal Salvage Officer. Along with it went a colored sergeant assigned as driver. I jumped in alongside him, ordered him to make knots for the *King Salvor*, a mile and a half way away

at the other end of the harbor. He did.

We ran alongside the *King Savior* at the quay with our horn shrieking to get quick attention aboard her. We got it. Captain Harding came tumbling down from his cabin to meet me at the rail almost before the jeep jerked to a stop there.

"Where's Ankers?" I asked.

Harding motioned toward the harbor. A quarter of a mile away on the floats, I could make out Ankers with some of his divers down, working on the *Spahi*. It would be an hour at least before he could safely break enough men away to do me any good, or even safely leave them and come ashore himself. I gave that up.

"Who's ashore of that party?"

"Ensign Aldrich and a storekeeper, there in the shack, Captain," Harding replied. "What's up?"

"The *Porcupine*'s torpedoed and sinking, skipper," I explained hurriedly. "They're trying to get her into Arzeu before she goes down. No use sending out the *King Savior*. That destroyer'd be gone before you could ever get there. She's probably gone anyway unless something's done quick. I'm starting overland to board her from Arzeu and see if there's anything'll keep her afloat till she gets in. I'll be aboard her in an hour. Got a good man I can take along to lend me a hand?"

"There's Jock Brown," he suggested, indicating his Fourth Engineer, who along with most of his deck force was lining the *King Savior*'s port rail, listening eagerly. "He's good!"

"O.K., Captain." I was willing to take Harding's word for it. "Hop aboard here, Jock," I sang out to Brown. "Just as you are. We're getting underway!"

Brown, clad in khaki, cased in his raincoat, hurdled the gunwale to the quay, started to wiggle past me into the back seat of the jeep. The driver began to set his multitudinous levers to back clear. I had one more concern.

"Harding," I ordered, "tell Ensign Aldrich to get a big army truck, load it with all the portable salvage pumps you can give him off the *King Savior*, get himself a dozen men, a couple of divers and their rigs, and start for Arzeu as soon as he's loaded." The sergeant jammed home the last lever, let in the clutch, the jeep

started to back away from the quay. "And tell Aldrich to wait for me on the quay at Arzeu, ready to work the minute the *Porcupine* comes in—if she ever does!" I shouted as the jeep hauled away. Captain Harding waved he understood.

We bounced down the harbor road, up the incline, through the city traffic of Oran, and out on the open highway to the eastward with no stops for anything. That colored sergeant knew not only his driving but his M.P.'s—all of them waved us along. We raced for thirteen miles through the countryside, then through the village of St. Cloud in whose main (and only) street a column of our infantry advancing on Oran on D-day morning had been trapped and heavily machine gunned by the "friendly" French from the thick-walled houses still pock-marked by our return fire. Finally after some eight miles more of open road we reached our destination. In thirty minutes all told, we were in Arzeu, scene of the major Army landings on November 8 for the assault on Oran.

The jeep squealed to its first stop since leaving the *King Savior's* side, in front of the stone building housing the local Port Commandant's office. Lt. Comdr. Dickey, who had gone through hell on the *Hartland*, now in charge at Arzeu, was waiting for us in front of his office. He jumped on the running board to guide us. We threaded our way along the Arzeu waterfront to the massive Grand Quay, which like every quay in every French port, great or small, was built of heavy masonry, apparently intended to last down the ages. Alongside the quay, engines running, lay the MTB I had asked for.

Thanking Dickey and asking him to take care of Ensign Aldrich's party due to arrive in a few hours, Jock Brown and I jumped from the jeep to the MTB, which immediately cast off. With over a thousand horsepower pushing on that quivering 70 foot hull, we roared out of Arzeu harbor, throttles full out, and headed north into the Mediterranean.

Three miles out we cleared the rocky point of Cape Carbon. No longer sheltered by its lee, we met a fresh breeze and a choppy sea with waves running some four feet high. The MTB began to pound heavily as she smashed into it, still at full power. I looked glumly down from the low hull to the waves alongside—such a

sea, while nothing to an undamaged destroyer, might well break in two and finish off the weakened *Porcupine* laboring through it in tow, even if somehow she managed not to sink first still in one piece.

It was a little past one o'clock in the afternoon on a typical winter's day off the Algerian coast—dull, overcast skies, a chill wind, a gray sea running moderate whitecaps which would make it difficult to spot a U-boat periscope and its fine feather of foam. The solitary offset to all this was that it didn't happen to be raining and the visibility was good—a real advantage I decided when a few miles further along through my binoculars I first made out masts on the horizon ahead with a large patrol plane circling low above them. So long as daylight lasted, that plane would be a great help in spotting the U-boat periscope, and perhaps even the barely submerged U-boat itself, if it came in for another attack on the handicapped flotilla.

It was startling how fast our racing MTB raised above the horizon the hulls beneath the mastheads we had first sighted. We were swiftly in the midst of them, to see one destroyer at high speed zigzagging constantly about two others which seemed barely to be moving. And now even disregarding the fact that she was the one being towed, it took no high I.Q. to distinguish which of this last pair at opposite ends of a long towline, was the *Porcupine*.

Even from some distance, it was evident she was in a bad way; close aboard it seemed astonishing the wallowing *Porcupine* didn't roll over and sink any second, for her stern was awash, she had a terrible list to starboard, and next to no freeboard left amidships on that side.

That list to starboard both puzzled me and caused me some delay as my MTB slowed down to starboard of her, and started to circle round to land me there as I had ordered. We had purposely made our approach down the starboard side of the tow, expecting to find that the high side and the *Porcupine* heeled down to port, which was the side on which the radio message had reported her torpedo damage. However, someone had apparently blundered; she must have been hit to starboard instead.

It was obvious we had better not attempt laying the little MTB

alongside the *Porcupine*'s heeled down side, if for no better reason than that it was highly undesirable to be on that side should she roll over while the MTB was there, as seemed probable. The British sub-lieutenant commanding her looked dubiously from the *Porcupine*'s starboard side to me. I was about to suggest to him that I had changed my mind and that he keep on past the destroyer's stern before he made his turn, when I heard an officer on the destroyer's bridge bellowing to us through a megaphone to keep off their starboard side.

That made it unanimous. The sub-lieutenant reversed his helm, came back to his original course for perhaps half a minute longer. Clear then of the *Porcupine*'s stern, he started a wider circle to bring him up on her port side, parallel to her course, and fairly close aboard.

We swung round astern of her, crossed her wake, and started to head back in the same direction as the destroyer was going, sheering gradually in towards her port side and easing the engines to dead slow to avoid overrunning her. Owing to the starboard list, her port side was very high out of water, exposing her bilge keel, and except near the stern, making her difficult to board from the low deck of an MTB. I spotted a wide "Abandon Ship" scramble net hanging down her port side right abaft her bridge in way of the smokestack and was about to indicate we should come alongside there, when my eyes traveling further aft, I saw after all she had been torpedoed to port. Practically amidships and a little abaft that scramble net, for a considerable distance the port side of the *Porcupine* just wasn't there any more!

That exploding torpedo, running deep evidently, had done a terrific job. From the line of her shattered deck, now high above the sea, down to the water, there was a gaping cavern in the *Porcupine*'s port side some twenty feet or more long, with the waves washing freely in and out the vast hole as she rose and fell in the seaway. It seemed miraculous that that destroyer, even though she was a very new and a large one, around 1900 tons, should still be afloat at all.

Without any word of caution to him about it being necessary to take it gingerly, the sub-lieutenant made his approach on the

Porcupine, with Jock Brown and me at his starboard rail, ready to leap from his deck for the scramble net the instant he came close enough. I warned the MTB skipper to sheer his craft away the moment we had jumped, lest impact with his boat rising and falling in the waves alongside, be the last straw wanting to break the *Porcupine*'s back. He nodded acquiescence.

With some six feet of water still between the two vessels, we jumped together to land on all fours in the scramble net, catching its heavy rope meshes with both hands and feet and very much helped by the circumstance that the destroyer's high sloping side was heeled sharply away from us. Some British seamen above, rushing to stand by with lines and life preservers should we miss our grip, now dropped them as unnecessary and lent us a hand to help drag us over the port gunwale on to the destroyer's oil-covered deck while the MTB sheered off, never having made contact.

The *Porcupine*'s captain, Commander George Scott Stewart of the Royal Australian Navy (as I soon learned), hurried to meet us at the rail. Like most Australians, he was a big chap, but one glance at him showed he was nearly as much on his last legs as was his ship. His eyes were sunken, his face haggard and deeply lined, his uniform streaked with oil and water. In a moment we were joined by his Chief Engineer. Between the two of them, they swiftly informed me of their situation.

The torpedo some hours before had caught them low squarely in the middle of the engine room, a perfect shot. They had made no contact before by Asdic with any U-boat; they had seen no track of the torpedo. Neither had any of their sister destroyers. Nor had any Asdic contact been made since by anybody in the flotilla in spite of a very thorough underwater search by their sisters backed by the certain knowledge that there *was* a U-boat very close aboard. After an hour's fruitless search, seeing she was still afloat, one of her sisters had taken her in tow while the other had continued about as guard, and best of all, a British patrol plane had come out to watch from overhead.

Where the U-boat was, nobody knew. But it must still be close, regardless of whether its future intentions were to escape or to attack again, for being compelled willy-nilly to stay submerged,

it could not have traveled very far from its point of attack, and they hadn't either. Most likely it was close about, looking for a favorable chance to evade the circling destroyer and sneak in another shot at them or at their sister towing, both of them now practically sitting ducks, unable to maneuver. So much for the U-boat, from which at any instant we might expect another torpedo—the only reason Stewart could see it hadn't come already was that the U-boat captain saw no need as yet to expend another torpedo on him.

His ship, he continued, as I could see, was in desperate condition. The explosion had completely torn away his port side amidships and his bottom, and instantly deprived him of all power and light. His port engine, the heavy high pressure turbine there, with no foundation any longer under it, had simply dropped through the hole in the bottom of the ship and sunk. That, I saw, explained the puzzling fact of the starboard list instead of a port heel—with such a heavy weight gone from the port side, the unbalanced ship had no option but to heel immediately to the opposite side. And she had.

He had lost his whole engine room watch below at the time of the accident. Not one man had got out alive. The blast of the exploding torpedo had killed them all, but if it hadn't the result was the same anyway. What was left of the engine room was wholly flooded all the way across the ship from port to starboard, and looking down through the deck hatches into it, a few dead engineers could be seen just under water trapped amongst broken pipe lines and machinery. The others were invisible, probably caught even lower down. Very somberly, Stewart told me he hoped the explosion had killed them all outright and at least saved them the agony of being drowned somewhat more slowly trapped amongst the wreckage or, worse still, of being cooked by escaping steam till the water rose over them.

When he and his Chief Engineer, Lt. Comdr. Robert Bartley, R.N. (for Stewart's crew, except for himself, were all Royal Navy as was his ship), had seen, immediately after the explosion, that their ship promised to stay afloat even a few minutes, they had turned to with the remainder of their crew to see if they could save her. Left helpless without any power and with all the ship's

pumps submerged in the engine room, there was little they could do, but that little they had tried. Forward and aft of the shattered engine room they had closed all watertight doors and hatches, hoping in spite of the bad list, the damage amidships, and numerous leaks aft, that the ship might hold together and they might keep her afloat till they were towed in.

But the situation had grown increasingly hopeless in the hours following. Water steadily coming into the after compartments had sunk the stern lower and lower till now it was awash. The list to starboard had continuously increased, apparently increasing the leakage in proportion. With the vessel still from four to five hours away from port, it seemed unlikely now she would last till she got in. And they dared tow no faster or the ship, almost broken in two and already working badly in the open sea, would certainly break in half.

And that was it, Commander Stewart concluded soberly. They had had already some terrible hours, he and his crew were badly exhausted, all hands fully expected to be torpedoed again. But they were still perfectly willing to fight for their ship and had no thought of abandoning her till she went from under them. If there was anything further I could suggest, they would gladly tackle it.

But Stewart's bitter disappointment was evident enough, though not expressed, that after all his desperate struggle to keep his ship afloat till help came, he saw his ship boarded by two men only, outfitted with nothing but their bare hands, when unquestionably he had expected a fully equipped salvage ship, loaded with pumps and jammed with fresh seamen, to come racing to his aid. I saw no point, however, in adding to his depression by telling him that neither his country nor mine had provided any such ship; that the only ship I did have was so slow that she could arrive only after he had sunk, and rather than engage in any useless gestures, I had not bothered to send her out, coming instead myself with Brown the fastest way. So I told him only that Brown and I would first look around, then do what we could to help.

Ordering his engineer officer, Lt. Comdr. Bartley, to do whatever I said, Commander Stewart went back to his bridge to keep in touch with his lookouts and his gun crews for whatever good they

might do in warding off another attack, while I took Bartley and started aft to see for myself.

Getting aft on the *Porcupine* was not simple. The deck was listed and fouled with heavy black oil blown from ruptured fuel tanks below by the blast, making footing very unsure. Amidships, the port side had to be avoided, for the deck plating there was buckled up and fractured all the way to the fore and aft center line. Even to starboard (on which side we passed aft) the deck plating was badly corrugated, and what little I could see of the starboard side shell plating still showing above water, was corrugated also. It gave me an eerie feeling as I passed over it, to see those steel corrugations working like an accordion there amidships, as that precariously held together destroyer rose and fell in the sea.

Once past the damaged section, Bartley, Brown, and I hastily clambered up the sloping deck to the high side again, for a little aft the waves were already lapping over the starboard gunwale onto the deck. We wiggled by a multiple torpedo tube mount, still with all its torpedoes in it, then continued aft to port outboard of the after deckhouse. Atop that, I noted the gun crews all in life-preservers, at action stations ready at their loaded guns. But I knew as well as they, this was hardly more than a morale-building gesture—against a submarine attacking submerged, guns are next to worthless. Only rapid maneuvering and the dropping of depth charges are of any value and the wounded *Porcupine* was now helpless to do either. Being literally now in the same boat with them, however, I had some inkling of the nervous strain they were under. Perhaps I felt it even a trifle more, for if another torpedo came, they at least would be on the topside in the clear while I, most likely, would for a while be below where a life-preserved would do me very little good.

"Down here, Captain," said Bartley, a much chunkier individual than his skipper, indicating through a door in the deckhouse, a ladder leading below. "There's our trouble."

I squeezed through the deckhouse door, looked down, lighting the space below with my flashlight. I was looking down into the destroyer's wardroom, forward and aft of which apparently were the officers' staterooms. I went some steps down the ladder for a

better view. The deck below me was flooded, deep on the starboard side, shallower to port, with the whole surface covered by a thick layer of black oil. On the ship's center line, the water seemed as yet only about three feet deep, not too deep for wading. So followed by Bartley and then by Brown, I descended the rest of the way down the ladder, to find myself in water not quite to my hips. That oil-covered water felt rather messy; to make matters worse, the surface was dotted with oil-soaked pillows, mattresses, and other debris floating out the stateroom doors to swash about aimlessly.

I flashed my light forward. There was a long passage there, terminating in some storerooms forward, with, so Bartley told me, the ship's main fuel oil tanks beneath those storerooms. I started forward up the passage, with the water shoaling as I went, for the ship was decidedly down by the stern. By the time I brought up against a solid bulkhead which stopped me, the deck in the passage was dry.

"That's the after side of the engine room bulkhead, Captain," Bartley volunteered. "She's all flooded for'd of that. And the main fuel tanks are right under us."

I swung my light over the after side of that thin steel bulkhead, all that lay between the engine room wide open to the sea, and us in the foundering stern. But the trifling leaks showing in that bulkhead could never account for all the water already in the stern and still coming in. Possibly somehow the oil tanks below us were ruptured and acting as passages to admit water aft. I turned my light downward. The deck we stood on looked intact; to starboard and port in it were two dogged down manholes, which the Chief Engineer said led to the fuel tanks below. Seeing that the manholes showed no signs of leakage, which should occur if the tanks underneath were now open to the sea and under any pressure, I suggested to Bartley we slack the covers a bit to check, and if the manholes then showed no leaks, we open them to make sure.

Bartley had a wrench. Using it very cautiously, Jock Brown slacked off the starboard cover a bit, ready instantly to drive it tight again should oil spurt out. Nothing happened. We slacked a little more. Still no leak. Assured by that, we slacked the manhole off completely, opened it, looked down into the tank. It wasn't

more than two thirds full. There couldn't be any particular leak into the starboard fuel tank anyway, or the oil in it would have been pressed hard up against the deck by the entering water.

We secured the starboard manhole. In the same way we tried the port manhole, even more cautiously if that were possible, for that was on the side of the exploding torpedo and more likely to be ruptured. But it wasn't; like the starboard tank it also was only partly full. We resecured the port manhole.

Rather puzzled now I looked at Bartley. Water was certainly coming into the stern; he assured me it had risen several feet the last hour, since before that the port side of the wardroom had been free of water altogether. Where then was it coming from? Very evidently it was not coming through the after engine room bulkhead, either above the deck on which we stood, nor through the fuel oil tanks below that deck. The Chief Engineer couldn't tell me. But I judged that if the water rose two more feet in the next hour, the ship would either sink or lose all stability and capsize, and probably very suddenly with no warning at all. An hour was the outside limit we had in which to do something effective.

We sloshed back aft through debris and increasingly deep water to the wardroom. There, immersed in the oil-covered flood to our waists, we stopped for another look around. To starboard, the water was deep; probably over our heads. To port, of course, it was much shoaler. From what I could see by flashlight of the port side, there was no damage through which water was entering, yet entering it certainly was from somewhere and fast enough soon to end everything.

Three miserable-looking figures now, there in the half-flooded wardroom of the sinking *Porcupine*, Bartley, Brown and I stood in the darkness amongst the floating debris, flashing our lights all about, to starboard, to port, aft, forward, even overhead at the deck beams, looking for any signs of those fatal leaks.

Brown's practiced eyes lighted on something unusual; he took me by the shoulder and twisted me first to starboard, then to port, to look. On each side, port and starboard a few feet off the center line, as he focused his flashlight on the oily surface, was a slight circular eddy in the oil, resembling a moderate spring bubbling

up from below. Their symmetrical arrangement off center suggested something to me; I asked Bartley what was below those eddies.

The Chief Engineer first flashed his light about the wardroom to check the locations, then answered,

"Those are the manholes on the access trunks leading down to the port and starboard shaft alleys. It's a wiper's job once a watch to go down those trunks and oil the spring bearings on the propeller shafts. But those manhole covers are always dogged down when we're underway, except while the wiper's below inspecting. They're closed now."

Jock Brown, an engineer himself, promptly pushed into the deeper water to starboard, then into the shallower water to port, to check by feeling around below with his feet. He nodded; both the manholes were closed as Bartley had said.

But still there wasn't any question; closed or not, those eddies showed water was coming up through both manholes. Those were the leaks we were looking for, and very likely the only leaks, for the shaft alleys to which they gave access there in the stern led forward port and starboard directly into the flooded engine room and very low down. Water from the engine room must be coming under considerable pressure through the bulkhead stuffing boxes, intended to make a watertight joint round the propeller shafts, but now undoubtedly badly damaged and no longer watertight. That water was flooding both the shaft alleys and then rising under heavy pressure through the leaking manhole covers into the stern to flood it. If we could stop that water, we could save the ship!

Bartley sang out to the seamen peering down from the deck above for someone to pass him a hammer. In a moment it came down. Jock Brown seized it, passed me his flashlight, closed both his eyes tightly, disappeared bodily through the oil-covered water to starboard, doubled himself over the manhole there, feeling in the blackness for the dogs holding it down. Muffled by the water, we heard the clang of his hammer driving the steel dogs up hard, battening down that hatch for a full due. Then he burst back through the surface, a terrible sight, soaked through, slimy with black oil, half-blinded with what oil had got into his eyes in spite

of their being tightly closed.

Brown leaned back against the ladder to get his breath, wiped his eyes as well as possible with some waste I gave him, then gasped,

"That manhole's as tight now as it'll ever get, Captain. Every dog's hammered hard home!" He paused for several deep breaths, then added, "I'll do the other one in a minute."

But he had no need. Bartley took the hammer from him, himself floundered through the water to the port eddy. Fortunately, with the water there not so deep, the Chief Engineer was submerged only to his chin when he doubled over to feel for the dogs and then drove them up till they hit the stops and would drive no more. At that, he straightened up, from his neck down as much a mess as Brown.

As soon as the roiled oil and water had settled enough to make an observation possible, I flashed my light hopefully to where the eddies had been, port and starboard. My heart sank. There were both eddies again, so far as I could judge, bubbling about as much as ever. We hadn't accomplished much, though now for certain we knew the manhole covers were dogged down as hard as possible. But they were still leaking.

"What's the matter with those manhole covers, Chief?" I asked dully. "Gaskets gone?"

"No, Captain," said Bartley gloomily, looking at those rippling eddies which were spelling out the doom of his ship, "they're just too light to stand much. I felt the one I worked on; it's bulging up from the water pressure under it. It's too thin for the job."

I nodded. I understood, all right. Destroyers were rightly enough slangily denominated as "tin cans." To save weight they were built practically of paper-thin steel. At points where the designer thought he could get away with it, he went even farther and used practically tissue-paper thinness. Here on these manhole covers he had guessed wrong, and the tissue-paper just wasn't taking it. Those too thin manhole covers were going to cost Britain and her Allies a badly needed destroyer.

Bleary-eyed Jock Brown and oil-smeared Robert Bartley gazed dismally at the eddying surfaces sharply spot-lighted in the gloom by our flashlights. Damn the designer of that destroyer anyway!

Such a little thing to lose a ship over. Ten pounds more of steel on those two hatches and the ship would have been safe!

"Well," I said, "we haven't stopped those leaks much. There are only two things now'll save her, either pumps to keep ahead of this leakage, or shores to stop it. Jock, you get on deck, get together with the ship's carpenter, and see if you can rig some wedges and a couple of shores to hold those bulging manhole covers down and maybe choke off the leaks; partly, anyway. And you, Chief, come with me while we look into the pump situation." I had noted a hand-operated little handy-billy pump on deck as we went below. Perhaps if the destroyer had enough of them, we might by vigorous hand pumping manage to hold her stern up till we got her in.

I went up the ladder on to the open deck, to blink momentarily in the daylight above till I got used to it. Brown and Bartley followed me. Oil-soaked and dripping from the waist down, I looked a wreck, but compared now to either Brown or Bartley, I was Beau Brummell himself. Jock Brown started in search of the carpenter.

Bartley and I looked at the handy-billy. It had already been in use, but had clogged with debris and quit. Some seamen had dismantled it, cleaned it out, and it was about ready to go again. The suction hose was dropped again into the wardroom, a seaman this time sent down to keep debris as clear of the strainer as possible. Two other sailors on the handles started pumping vigorously. The handy-billy swiftly caught a suction and started to discharge.

I turned away in disgust. Such a piddling stream was coming from the handy-billy as to be ludicrous on a sinking ship if it had not been tragic. Possibly a dozen of those little hand-operated pumps might be of some good in keeping up with the water—one was worthless.

"Got any more?" I asked Bartley.

He shook his head glumly,

"No; one's our allowance."

"Got anything else at all on this bucket in the way of a portable pump?" I queried in desperation.

Bartley nodded.

"There's a portable electric-driven centrifugal pump we're running now off our emergency diesel generator," he replied. "But

that's already in use forward. We've got it down with the boilers on the other side of the flooded machinery spaces, taking care of the leakage coming through into the stokehold from the engine room right aft of it."

My heart literally leaped. An electric-driven portable pump aboard and emergency power available to drive it! Why wasn't it aft on the sinking stern where obviously it was most needed? Why hadn't it been mentioned to me before? But this was no time for argument or discussion. I ran forward, disregarding the dangerous going, singing out to Bartley behind me,

"Come on, Chief! I want to see that pump and those leaks forward!"

Still running, I came abreast the boiler room hatch near the smokestack, just forward of the flooded engine room, clambered hurriedly down through the double-doored airlock, then down again on the steep vertical ladder to the fireroom floorplates. In front of me was the after boiler, secured of course, since there was no use for steam. On the floorplates, more alluring to my eyes at that moment than a sight of Aphrodite herself, sat a compact portable pump, beautiful to behold! And running too, on that otherwise dead ship! For on my way down, I had spotted on a platform high up in the boiler room that small diesel-driven emergency generator, big enough to supply the necessary electricity. That destroyer designer, God bless his soul, had at least put some of the weight he had saved by skimping elsewhere, into that heavenly emergency diesel generator and thus to me absolved himself of all his other sins. Here was exactly what I needed!

For as I had suspected (from the fact that the bow half of the destroyer must be fully buoyant, being high out of water) the leakage coming forward through the steel bulkhead from the engine room into the boiler room was of no great moment in the circumstances. Hastily I sized up the leaks, squirting in fine streams here and there through the strained bulkhead. It would take half a day at least for them seriously to endanger the ship, and that electric portable pump before me was just loafing on the job of keeping the boiler room bilges dry.

By then, Bartley had worked himself through the airlock also

and was down beside me.

"Chief," I ordered, "get this pump out of here four bells, and get it aft! We won't even bother with what water leaks into here the next few hours! After that, if we have to, your little handy-billy'll do everything that's wanted here!"

Bartley looked at me dubiously. After all, to any engineer, protecting his boilers from damage is of primary importance. But I didn't see it that way on the *Porcupine*. Suppose the water in the fireroom did rise high enough meanwhile to flood his dead fireboxes, soak his firebrick, and ruin the boiler insulation? What of it? Of what use was it to save the boilers intact if in doing so, we lost the ship, boilers and all? But I sensed the doubt in his eyes and squelched it instantly.

"Shake it up now, Chief! There's no time to lose!"

Bartley uttered not a word, turned to comply. After all, his captain had ordered him to do whatever I wanted. What happened now to the boilers was on my head, no longer on his.

In a few minutes that pump was shut down, its special electric cable disconnected and hurriedly coiled for shifting, and half a dozen wearied British seamen, as many as could get a hand on it, were mule-hauling that quarter ton of steel and copper up the narrow ladder, through the airlock out of the fireroom, and aft along the treacherously listed deck.

Others meanwhile were just as hastily rushing aft the portable electric cable for it, its suction hoses, its strainer and foot-valve, and a length of discharge hose. In not over ten minutes from the time I first sighted it on the fireroom floorplates, that portable pump, lashed to the awash deck aft over the wardroom, was fully hooked up again, its suction line primed with water, and ready to go.

"Start her up, Chief!" I sang out.

Bartley waved to a stoker stationed far forward over the fire-room. The latter poked his head down the hatch there, told the electrician below to throw in the switch to the emergency generator. In an instant, the pump was up to full speed, purring smoothly. In another moment, it caught a suction and a fine, solid stream of

water, 200 gallons a minute at least, started to shoot out the discharge hose and overboard. I looked at Bartley, Bartley looked at me, and a beatific smile wreathed his oil-smeared face (and mine too, I suppose). That stream would do it; the *Porcupine* was saved!

The next hour proved it so; that is, we were safe at least from sinking or capsizing, though not saved yet either from breaking in two or of being torpedoed again.

To help matters aft, Jock Brown, aided by Bartley and the carpenter, got some makeshift shores wedged down on the manholes aft which certainly reduced their bulging and apparently somewhat reduced the leakage through them but didn't stop it altogether. Still, to my chagrin, the most that electric pump was able to do, in spite of the fine stream of water it was throwing overboard, was to hold the water level about steady. It no longer rose on us, which was the main thing; but it didn't go down much either, which would have given us some margin of safety.

That I couldn't understand, since almost certainly we were ejecting water faster than it could possibly be still leaking in through those shored-down manhole covers. But the enigma was shortly resolved for me. A young sub-lieutenant, hearing me question Bartley on the possibilities of finding and stopping other leaks aft, gave me the answer.

"My stateroom, Captain, is below here to starboard. The airport in it can't be closed tight; it's always leaked in a storm even when it's dogged down. Right now it's submerged. The sea must be just pouring through that airport." He pointed out to me to starboard the spot below which lay his flooded stateroom.

I looked. At that location, the water on deck was a couple of feet deep over the starboard gunwale. His airport in the side of the ship must be at least five feet below the surface. Inside I knew the starboard side staterooms were flooded outboard to the deck beams overhead. There wasn't a chance in the world, either inside or outside the *Porcupine*, for any of us to get to that airport to try some emergency method of sealing it off. That now must be the major leak—just a defective airport. Why, I thought bitterly to myself, couldn't ship's officers see that at least known defects in watertightness were remedied before their ships went to sea in wartime?

But I said nothing; I knew only too well by experience that the same damned carelessness existed in our own Navy.

So there we were. We were at least keeping up with the leakage, the stern was no longer sinking, the listing to starboard which shortly would have capsized us, had stopped. It was 3 P.M., we were still about three hours away from safe haven at Arzeu, we had about three hours more of daylight. If now we did not break in half and if we did not get torpedoed again, we should get in while we still had the blessed daylight to give help to that zigzagging destroyer and to a second patrol plane (which had come out to join the first one) in keeping the U-boat off us.

If—if— The “if” relating to the U-boat and its torpedoes was wholly outside my control; how about the “if” relating to our breaking in half? I left Bartley and Brown aft to see that nothing happened to that all-important pump, and went myself amidships to watch the working of the fractured *Porcupine*.

I should have stayed aft, where ignorance at least was bliss. I hardly dared breathe as I looked again for the first time in nearly two hours at the damage amidships. She had seemed bad enough before—never had I seen so little left holding together any vessel, and I had seen innumerable blasted ships. But now it seemed to me the cracks from the wholly ruptured deck to port had gone still further through what little corrugated but otherwise intact steel plating yet remained to starboard on her deck. I watched her work, the bow and the stern halves seeming to rise and fall against the horizon line independently of each other in the seaway, with the corrugated plating holding the parts together opening and closing like a hinge.

At that moment, Commander Stewart, coming down from his bridge for a look aft himself, joined me. He already knew, of course, that we had caught up with the leaks aft—the *Porcupine* was not going to sink or capsize before she got in. He thanked me wholeheartedly, then made a request.

“Captain,” he said, his own wan face lending weight to his statement, “my crew’s all done in and half-frozen besides. And the sight of their shipmates there,” he pointed significantly to the dead engineers visible in the water below through the machinery

hatch before us, "isn't helping any. I want to serve out a double ration of rum now to brace them up, and maybe warm them up a trifle too. Any objections?"

"Of course not, Commander," I answered. "I'll have a shot myself; I'm as wet and cold as anybody. But it's your ship anyway; why should I object?"

"Oh," he explained, "I thought you understood where the rum's stowed. That's the whole point. The rum locker's in the lazarette in the fantail. With the wardroom half-flooded, the only way we can get to the rum now is down the after deck hatch into the compartment just abaft the wardroom. That space is free of water; the watertight door between it and the wardroom's holding fine. Once we're in that after space, we open a manhole cover in the lower deck there to get into the rum locker below. Seeing how she's flooded aft, I didn't want to open that lower manhole into the lazarette without your knowing it."

It was now my turn to exclaim,

"Oh!" For but too well I knew that the only real buoyancy aft which was keeping the stern afloat, lay wholly in that unflooded after compartment, in the lower deck of which was the manhole he wished to open to get to the rum. I had already battened down hard the main deck hatch to that after compartment, lest a wave sweeping higher than usual across the awash stern, go down that hatch and sink us. And worse yet, if the lazarette below in which the rum was stowed should be open to the sea and flooded under pressure, either from the shaft alleys or otherwise, and if the manhole cover to the lazarette should get away from them, a geyser of water would shoot upward, promptly flooding the compartment above. The stern would sink like a chunk of lead, and either in one piece or in two the *Porcupine* would swiftly disappear beneath our feet.

I shook my head.

"No, Commander; don't do it. It's taking too much of a chance. I'm sorry, but I must object."

Stewart looked keenly disappointed, but said nothing and went aft. I turned back to watching the ship work. The longer I watched, the surer I felt she would never stand it for the three hours longer

it would take us to get in. That strain would have to be eased or we should have saved the *Porcupine* from sinking only to have her break in two on us instead.

I looked around. Ahead of us, slowly pitching to the oncoming waves, was our sister destroyer at the far end of both of the *Porcupine*'s chain cables, shackled together to give the longest possible towline with the greatest possible shock-absorbing qualities, to ease the towing strain. That towline, sagging into the water, was already 240 fathoms long and fairly heavy—nothing further could be done to improve it.

I glanced at the sea. The white-capped waves there weren't any worse than when I had boarded the *Porcupine* two hours before, but they weren't any better either. And the waterlogged *Porcupine*'s condition, always bad, had unfortunately grown even worse till we had that electric pump running aft and stopped further sinking. But more than that was required if the ship, having escaped one fate, was not certainly to fall victim to another. Harsh as the cure might seem to the survivors on the *Porcupine*, already near the breaking point from long-continued exposure to the imminent danger in the fiery blast of another torpedo of joining the ghastly figures of their shipmates in the engine room before me, still that cure would have to be undertaken. We must slow down—there was no other way out—and not only lengthen out the period of exposure to torpedoing again but, worse even, by the delay in reaching Arzeu, stretch that period of exposure into the oncoming night when our patrolling planes overhead would be useless and the U-boat would have far better opportunity of attacking again with impunity.

Commander Stewart, having had a quick look-see aft, came back abreast me. I stopped him.

"I'm sorry, Commander, to have to advise this, but I must. You're making three knots; it's too much for your ship. Signal the destroyer ahead to slow down immediately to two knots."

Commander Stewart, already haggard and heartsick, winced as if I had struck him. As well as I, he saw instantly all the implications. But he made no complaint.

"Aye, aye, sir," he gulped out, and went forward to his bridge

to semaphore the signal. Hand flags started to wigwag from the port wing of his listed bridge; from far ahead of us, other flags waggled back. In a minute or two, the sagging chain between the two destroyers took a deeper sag—the tow had slowed down by a third. Anxiously over the next few minutes I watched the bow and the stern of the *Porcupine* rising and falling against the line of the far horizon. It seemed to me the motion had eased as compared to formerly; certainly the corrugations before me on the deck were hinging less than before. There was no certainty even so that they would last through, but at least the chances were better.

And thus, to the eye hardly making any headway at all toward the dimly visible shore still some ten miles off, we moved slowly onward towards Arzeu, our haven of safety if we could ever make it.

Hour after hour the grotesque procession crawled imperceptibly along over the heaving Mediterranean, with the *Porcupine*, sickeningly listed, stern awash, stem almost out of water, dragging along far astern of her towing sister, hard put to it to hold down to two knots. Overhead roared the two patrol planes in lazy circles, as slowly as they dared go, depth charges ready to release, sometimes near, sometimes a few miles off, with their pilots and bombardiers scanning the white-capped waves below for any sign of an ominous feather of spray which would denote the U-boat periscope moving in for the kill. And moving irregularly all around, at a speed which made us look as if we were stock still, zigzagged our other sister destroyer, constantly feeling with her high-pitched Asdic beneath the waves, now near the surface, now deeper down, for the hull of that unseen U-boat.

Somewhere behind the heavy overcast, the sun, invisible to us, sank at last below the horizon. Twilight came, then darkness. The protecting planes, useless now, for the last time circled low to roar over us wagging their wings in farewell, and vanished into the night. With their passing, silence came as well as darkness to add to our sad state; the roar of those engines in the sky, whether a real protection or not, had been an unutterable comfort to the souls of the worn seamen on the *Porcupine* below. Now in solitude, in eerie silence, in complete darkness (for no one on deck dared even for an instant press a flashlight button), abandoned by

our best protectors, we were left on the slippery deck of the *Porcupine*, groping blindly each time we took a step on that treacherous slope for something to clutch to keep from sliding overboard. Somewhere, we knew, off in the darkness, completely blacked out herself and invisible to us, our solitary remaining guard still circled, feeling endlessly beneath the sea with her Asdic for the enemy. But that was slight comfort to any man aboard the *Porcupine*. The Asdic had not saved her from that first devastating torpedo; what hope then that it would do any better now?

Before in the daylight, the hours had seemed endless to us as we dragged along; now in the silence and in the darkness, the minutes seemed like hours. But there was no help for it. Stolidly we clung to whatever was nearest, straining our eyes through the night for some sign of the coast.

A shadowy form came from aft, stopped alongside where, shivering in my wet khaki, I clung to the torpedo tube mount, as close as I could get to the hinging deck which I could no longer see. A voice, which I recognized as that of one of the British petty officers who had been tending the pump aft, sounded in my ear,

“ ‘Ere, Cap’n, ‘ave a drink o’ this. It’ll warm ye up a mite.”

Gratefully I fumbled for the proffered cup. Somehow the ship’s cook must have made hot coffee; it would be welcome. But the cup didn’t feel hot when I gripped it; as I brought it to my lips I smelled not hot coffee but, of all things—rum! I was so startled I nearly dropped it.

So the skipper had gambled after all on undogging the rum locker! And since there was the rum, he had won the gamble—the lazarette must have been empty of water. I could only conclude that faced by the added terrors of the coming night, he had decided his crew *must* have a bracer to stand up to it. And there was my share. I thanked the seaman who had brought it, gulped it down, practically a whole cupful. Almost immediately the night seemed less dark and I certainly felt warmer and much better. Perhaps the skipper had been right and I had been too cautious; at any rate, there was no gain in my ever mentioning the subject to him again.

Off to starboard, a vague shadow loomed up against the dark horizon; we were abeam Cape Carbon and soon were in its lee.

Only three more miles to go! And best of all, with some shelter now from that cape not far off, the sea calmed almost magically, our heaving to it eased perceptibly, and I was able to send word to the skipper on the bridge that he could safely speed the tow up to three knots again. Our second danger was passed; the *Porcupine* was no longer likely to break in two. I breathed a sigh of deep relief. Now we had left only the U-boat to be concerned over.

We started to move appreciably faster through the sea. I had little doubt but that the skipper of the towing destroyer, as much concerned and still as much exposed as we to the sole remaining danger, was construing that three knots very liberally. I didn't blame him.

The lights of unblacked-out Arzeu started to twinkle through the darkness ahead of us. Safety was almost within our grasp; involuntarily we began to hold our breaths lest that torpedo should come along now after all our struggles, to knock it from our very fingertips. The minutes started to slip by faster, the lights of Arzeu became brighter. In no very great interval, compared to the way the hours before had dragged along, we were only a mile away. Just one more mile and our torture would be ended. The last mile!

And then we stopped. I knew we were going to have to stop; so did every other man jack aboard. For it was clear to everyone that such a long tow could not possibly be taken into Arzeu, after all only a small harbor with slight room for maneuver inside. The stop had been prepared for. A trawler was waiting one mile outside Arzeu to pass us a short towline and haul us in on that. Meanwhile we would cast loose that 240 fathoms of anchor chain forming the sea towline, which the destroyer ahead of us was to heave in, recover, and at some later day, deliver again to us. For the *Porcupine* herself had no power to winch her irreplaceable anchor cables back aboard. Every fathom of them, port and starboard, was paid out in that towline.

We stopped. Now came the crucial moment. We were still in deep water a mile offshore, plenty deep enough for U-boat operation. We had hoped before to make that stop in daylight, with both planes and our destroyer circling us to keep off the enemy. But now it had to be made in darkness, the planes were gone alto-

gether, and our protecting destroyer could only weave back and forth well astern of us. In such close waters zigzagging on either beam or ahead of us was out of question.

It must, we felt, have been as evident to the U-boat captain as to any of us, that a stop would have to be made to reform the tow before it could enter Arzeu. And that stop would give him his golden opportunity—two destroyers tied together dead in the water as his targets, darkness to work in, and water shallow enough closer inshore to bottom his sub safely after his attack and play 'possum a while to avoid depth charges should the search for him afterwards grow too hot. Perhaps exactly that situation was what he had been waiting for, delaying his attack, playing with us as a cat does with a mouse which darts frantically here and there in its futile efforts.

We knew all this. We felt the U-boat captain knew it too. The only thing we could do was to make the stop as brief as possible. All had been prepared. The trawler sidled up in the darkness along our high port bow, caught a heaving line from our forecastle. Stewart's seamen there, revived by the rum, animated by the nearness of escape, spurred by the danger, smartly heaved aboard the trawler's towline, made it fast. The trawler sheered away, taking a slight strain on the towline, ready to tow instantly we were free of the other towline out ahead.

A shielded signal lantern, visible only dead ahead to the destroyer there, flashed out in dots and dashes from the *Porcupine's* bridge, signaling our sister to stand by to heave in the cables; we were about to let go. We got an answering flash in acknowledgment.

"Let go!" sang out Stewart to his forecastle gang.

Back amidships, still at my now useless post over the broken engine room, I caught the order, waited painfully each second following for the rattling of the chain out the hawsepipe which would show we were free, end our torment of being a dead duck, let the trawler (in smooth water now) drag us that last mile through the deep sea into the harbor as fast as God and her engines would let her take us.

Not a rattle. The seconds dragged out into minutes, still nothing happened. We lay there, motionless in the darkness. I could stand it no longer. I sloshed through the water to starboard lapping over

the submerged gunwale onto the deck, felt my way forward past the smokestack, fumbled in the night for the listing ladder to the bridge, climbed it as hurriedly as I dared. Once on the bridge, I made out several shadowy figures leaning forward, all apparently staring down through the darkness at the forecastle. I looked forward myself; it was, however, next to impossible to make out anything save a few dim forms clustered there, all evidently huddling low just ahead of the anchor windlass. But I could hear plenty—occasional hammer blows and a steady stream of heartfelt British oaths and seagoing curses floated aft to the bridge.

Nobody on the bridge had paid the slightest attention to my arrival—it was too dark to see much and besides they were all otherwise engrossed. I picked out the largest shadow in sight—that would be Commander Stewart.

"What's wrong, Commander?" I asked anxiously, shuffling up to him. Stewart turned, looked down, made out who it was.

"It's that bloody shackle!" he cursed. "It won't come apart! The cable's out to the bitter end, and it's our port cable we rarely use that's on *this* end of the towline. The last shackle there on deck is rusted and frozen solid! The bosun can't get it free! He's sloshed it with oil, soaked it in paraffin, smacked it with the biggest sledge on the ship, but still that God-damned locking pin won't drive out!" He paused for breath.

I considered. Every second's delay meant endangering not only ourselves but our undamaged sister, fatally tied to us and unable to get clear till we slipped that cable. I saw only one swift solution; dangerous, yes. If we tried it, we should as instantly expose our position as if we had lighted a flare. But the skipper had already taken one gamble and got away with it. The other dangers warranted his gambling again to get us quickly free.

"Get out your acetylene torch, Commander, and burn that chain cable in half! We can't wait!"

"I'd thought of that too, Captain," muttered Stewart sadly, "but we've nothing like a torch aboard. It's no go; I've got to leave it to the bosun and his mates!"

"O.K., skipper. But for God's sake, get 'em to shake it up! This is dangerous!" I turned away, started down the ladder. Stewart

said nothing, went silently back to peering down at his cursing men around that shackle. He needed no reminders as to how dangerous that totally unlooked-for delay could be.

I went back amidships, to shuttle back and forth over the sloping oily deck from the electric pump alongside the after deckhouse, still smoothly and unconcernedly pushing overboard the sea as fast as it spurted in through our leaks, to the fractured deck over the engine room, where the corrugations, with the ship now stopped and in smooth water, were at last wholly quiescent. Nothing in either spot profited by my solicitude, but I just couldn't take it any longer standing still.

Apparently the destroyer ahead couldn't either. Shortly a shielded signal lamp, sharply focused on the *Porcupine's* bridge to be visible on that line only, started to flicker out through the night in staccato flashes. The *Porcupine* answered; for a few minutes an animated discussion ensued. I learned the destroyer skipper ahead suggested slipping his end of the cable, thus at least letting him go free to get out of danger. The *Porcupine* objected—that would leave her with 240 fathoms of her cable, all she had, dangling from her bow and dragging on the bottom, effectively preventing any movement by her at all unless and until she managed to cut it free. She had no power whatever to heave in any of it and thus free herself of the drag on the bottom so she could be towed. If with the other end slipped, she then cut loose her end to free herself for towing, she would lose every shot of both her precious anchor cables. Stewart wouldn't think of it.

Evidently the other skipper saw his logic. Danger in wartime a British captain apparently accepted philosophically (or at least as philosophically as he could); but the loss of a couple of anchor cables was something obviously not to be thought of with things as scarce in England as they seemed to be. Stewart's opposite number acquiesced, shut down his signal lamp, hung on.

And that left us as before, with the bosun struggling fruitlessly to drive out the locking pin on the frozen shackle. My eyes wandered about in the darkness, from the lights of Arzeu dancing tantalizingly ahead of us to the black waters all about. Was there a U-boat out there somewhere, angling about beneath the surface

for a fine shot, waiting only for a careless gleam of light to fix his target for him? We wouldn't know till an exploding torpedo gave us the answer. There very probably was—the set-up for attack was perfect.

Under far worse conditions earlier in the war, Lieutenant Prien had taken his U-boat in the darkness through the defenses of Britain's main naval harbor, right into Scapa Flow itself. There nonchalantly taking his time, he had selected his target, the super-dreadnought *Royal Oak* lying in the middle of the whole fleet, and blasted her with a torpedo. Not satisfied with the results of that shot, which had hit forward and consequently might not be fatal, and in spite of the hubbub in the harbor caused by the explosion, he had calmly taken the next twenty minutes to get his U-boat into a position which suited him better. Then he let go with three more torpedoes together, all of which, hitting the already wounded *Royal Oak* amidships, promptly sank her. After that, Prien and his U-boat had escaped unscathed, leaving British faces as red as ours probably were after Pearl Harbor.

It would take no second Lieutenant Prien to dispose of the *Porcupine* and of her sister, helplessly tied together outside Arzeu. Any run-of-the-mill U-boat captain could do it. And we certainly had somewhere in our vicinity an undetected U-boat captain who already, by daring to attack a flotilla of destroyers looking for *him*, had demonstrated he was better than run-of-the-mill.

Commander Stewart in desperation gave up trying to drive out the locking pin in the frozen shackle, ordered his bosun to get some cold chisels and more sledges and cut a chain link apart instead. Obediently the bosun got the chisels and went to work with them and the sledges on one of the more than inch-thick links in the cable. But in the darkness, what ensued was terrible. The men holding the chisels could hardly see the chain they were trying to cut; the men trying to swing the heavy sledges had even worse luck in seeing the chisels. The results were only fiery oaths, smashed fingers, and hardly perceptible nicks in the chain. Stewart had to give that up also, and as a last resort send for his carpenter and all the hacksaws and hacksaw blades he had in his locker. Hacksawing that iron cable apart would be slow, but at least if

the supply of hacksaw blades held out till the chain link was sawed in two, it would be sure. The hacksawing started while the bleeding bosun's gang lay below to the forecastle momentarily to bandage and splint their smashed and broken fingers and as swiftly as possible get back into safer positions on the open deck again.

The rest of us, well over a hundred men, buckled into our life-preservers, of necessity stood idly by about the darkened topsides, in our mind's eye reviewing over and over again the invisible obstacles in our paths to the scramble net if we had to abandon ship, speculating on our chances of swimming that last mile to the shore ahead if we survived to swim it. On the forecastle, a few dark figures one after another relieved each other at feverishly plying the hacksaws.

A cigarette would have done a lot to relieve the tension. But on deck, lighting a match or even having a lighted cigarette might be the flicker which would give us away. It was not to be thought of. And the idea of voluntarily closing oneself below long enough for a smoke was even more repulsive; those engineers, our late shipmates, had been below when the first torpedo struck—and they still were. I wondered if it wouldn't be a fine idea to have the skipper broach the rum locker again and serve out more rum? About twice as much this time as the first time would be just about right. But regretfully I gave the idea up. The skipper was himself now down on the forecastle with his carpenter and the hacksaws—he was entitled to be let alone.

I had heard plenty of how it felt to be a marine on Guadalcanal, cowering in the jungle night in a foxhole, listening for the crackling of some twig, the rolling of some pebble, which meant a Jap snaking along on his stomach toward you to cut your throat. Was it any worse, I wondered, than being trapped in the dark in the open sea on a dead destroyer, futilely scanning the black water for some sign of a Nazi U-boat smoothly swimming along below, ready any instant to loose another torpedo which should send you to join your shipmates submerged in the wreckage beneath your feet? At least against the Jap you had a chance. If you were swift enough you might cut his throat instead as he took the final plunge into your foxhole; but against the U-boat, what could one do?

There was nothing at all to be done except to stand silently in the darkness on the sloping deck, listen to the water lapping up the awash side, hang tightly to something to avoid sliding overboard, keep in mind the way to the scramble net, and—try your damnedest to keep your imagination off the image of a U-boat somewhere near getting set to fire again, and your mind off the ghastly figures of those dead engineers just below you. It was all as simple as that.

Time seemed to have stopped. Caught in an agonizing situation, we and the *Porcupine* hung there helplessly, seemingly endlessly, while up forward a few of our shipmates slowly with tiny saws ate their way through the thick iron link which kept us trapped. They at least could work; we had to take it in anguished idleness.

To top off all, that day, December 10, happened to be my wife's birthday. A hell of a way for me to celebrate it, I reflected bitterly. We weren't young any more. The war had caused her heartsickness and distress enough over me already. I was not sure even that she knew I was in North Africa, no longer in Massawa . . .

A rattle and a banging forward, followed by a heavy splash in the water, brought blessed release at last. The chain link had parted, the towline had gone overboard, we were free!

Hardly had the severed chain splashed into the sea than I heard Commander Stewart's voice bellowing out from our forecastle,

"Trawler therel! Get under way!" and an instant later a signal flashed from us to our sister ahead to start heaving in and get herself clear. I looked at the illuminated hands of my watch. It was 10 P.M. We had been hung up by that frozen shackle over two hours!

The trawler's towline tightened, we started slowly to move again. She put on more power, then all she had. The short towline stretched taut, no sag in this one, and at five knots we soon were swiftly on our way again, eating up that last mile. The trawler was as anxious as we to get the hell out of there.

In fifteen minutes we were being dragged between the breakwaters through the narrow entrance into Arzeu harbor. The submarine defense net which had been swung aside to let us pass, was closing again behind us. With the closing of that gate, like several

tons of lead all my agonies dropped suddenly from my mind, leaving me light-headed and slightly giddy. Our dangers were passed—*H.M.S. Porcupine* hadn't sunk or capsized, she hadn't broken in two, somehow she had escaped being torpedoed again. We were in harbor with the rescued *Porcupine*, safe at last!

13

ONCE WELL INSIDE THE HARBOR and illuminated by the harbor lights, to us dazzling symbols of our escape, for the second time the tow was reformed. But this time it was done more quickly. The trawler heaved in on her short towline, secured herself to our high port bow. A tiny French tug nosed gently up to our port quarter. Between the two of them, the helpless *Porcupine* was cautiously turned 90°, then very tenderly pushed broadside, starboard side to, toward the main quay.

Everybody in the naval base at Arzeu seemed on that quay waiting for us, but I had eyes for only a few of them. There, thank God, was Ensign Aldrich and all his salvage party, ready and waiting to take over! He even had a diver all dressed up to his helmet, ready to go overboard in a couple of minutes if necessary.

We were breasted in toward the quay, heaving lines flew aboard, hawsers swiftly were made fast, and Ensign Aldrich, seizing a starboard boat davit, scrambled down to our awash deck, some five or six feet beneath the coping of the stone quay towering over us.

Swiftly I pointed out to him what was required. In next to no time, the *King Salvor*'s gasoline-driven salvage pumps (four-inch and six-inch units which seemed like monsters compared to the *Porcupine*'s solitary little two-inch electric pump), already placed on the quay abeam the destroyer's fantail, had dropped their ponderous suction hoses, looking for all the world like the tentacles of a huge octopus, down into the *Porcupine*'s wardroom and started to suck. Three heavy streams of water, well over 1000 gallons a minute, beautiful fountains to watch, started to splash into Arzeu harbor, pumping out the flooded stern of the *Porcupine*.

Once that was begun, I explained to Aldrich what further he was to do. As soon as the water inside the stern was low enough to expose the starboard staterooms, his men were to find and caulk tightly up with oakum or anything else that leaking airport, and stop the inflow of water through the ship's side. There would be no need for the diver unless they were otherwise unable to get to that airport.

Then when they had the wardroom dried down to its deck, they must further solidly shore down and caulk up those bulging man-hole covers from the shaft alleys to stop completely those two leaks also.

With all that done, the ship should be well up out of water again and a fair part of the list to starboard gone. Aldrich could then clean up whatever other stray water he found inside and any other leaks that exposed themselves.

Finally, he was then to take the *Porcupine's* small electric pump (which already had saved the ship) off the main deck, down below, and drag it forward from the wardroom up the passage to the storerooms over the main fuel tanks. There he was carefully to open the manhole covers to those fuel tanks, and if then they were no more full than when I had sighted them, he was to pump oil from starboard to port to counterbalance the weight of the vanished port engine, till the ship had straightened up or the port tank was full of oil, whichever happened first. After that, if there was anything left of the night, he was to keep careful watch till dawn, with some pumps always running, to take care of all eventualities.

By then it was nearly midnight. All the *Porcupine's* crew and officers had long since turned in and were dead to the world.

"I'm all washed up too, Aldrich," I confessed wearily. "I guess I can't take it any more the way I used to. You'll find me if you need me, stretched out on the transom in the chief petty officers' quarters forward in the forecastle, port side. The *Porcupine's* all yours now. Call me if you need me, but be damned sure you need me before you call," I concluded, and started my oil-smeared and bedraggled form forward up the slippery deck.

"Aye, aye, sir!" acknowledged Aldrich cheerfully. "Don't you

worry, Captain; rest yourself. We'll take care of this baby now. You'll not be called."

I wasn't.

It was around seven in the morning when, stiff and aching from seven hours in my wet clothes on that hard and cramped transom, I was waked at last by a petty officer, the same who had given me the rum, offering me another cup but this time actually full of steaming coffee. I drank it gratefully, went out on deck, looked aft.

I hardly recognized the *Porcupine* any more. Aldrich and his men had done a beautiful job during the night. Gone was that terrible list—the decks now were level and easy to walk on. But the most startling change was in the ship herself. I had never seen the *Porcupine* save with her bow high in the air, her stern awash, and her starboard gunwale buried in the sea. Now she was properly trimmed, her stern was some four feet clear of the water all around, about flush with the stone coping of the quay so one could easily step ashore, and her starboard gunwale stood as high above the sea as did the port one. She looked like a destroyer again—that is, she did if you didn't lean over the port side to gaze into the cavern there, and if you kept your eyes off the bulged and broken deck amidships.

The salvage task was done. Whatever more *H.M.S. Porcupine* now required to put her back again on the fighting line, was somebody else's business. I left aboard Ensign Aldrich, a few of his men, and a salvage pump to lend a hand for a few days if they were needed, and started everybody else loading the rest of the gear to go back by truck that afternoon to the *King Salvor* to be ready for the next job. Then saying good-by to Commander Stewart and to Lt. Comdr. Bartley, his Chief Engineer, I rounded up my jeep and my colored sergeant and got hold of Jock Brown. Still in our oil-soaked khaki, we two started back immediately by road for Oran, only more slowly this time.

14

JOCK BROWN AND I WERE BACK IN

Oran alongside the *King Salvor* by 11 A.M., hardly twenty-three hours since we had left her. Somehow it seemed longer. I had purposely returned to the ship rather than to my billet at the Grand Hotel d'Oran, because on the *King Salvor* I could at least get a *hot* bath. Very soon, both of us were under the shower heads, scrubbing tarry black fuel oil off our itching hides.

Captain Harding loaned me one of his khaki uniforms, which fitted nicely (neither of us happened to be very tall and the war had already worn both of us down equally to rather gaunt figures). Rigged out in Harding's clothes, revivified by ship's chow shortly after with Harding and his officers, and accompanied then by Harding, I stepped out on deck to be taken in one of the *King Salvor's* boats to the float in the harbor entrance from which Ankers and his men were working on the *Spahi*.

I met the usual diving scene—a portable air compressor with its gasoline engine throbbing steadily as it hammered the diver's air down to him, a stream of air bubbles rising through the water like huge clusters of grapes to burst on the surface some yards away, tenders, dressers, and mechanics all intently watching the bubbles and the diver's lines in the water before them.

"Red Gatchell's down now, plugging a ventilator on her foc's'le," Ankers explained casually, then asked eagerly, "What happened on the *Porcupine*, Captain? Did you get her in?"

I said we had and briefly told how, adding that both Jock Brown of the *King Salvor* and Vic Aldrich of his gang had certainly shined in their parts. Then I got down to more important matters.

"How're you coming on the *Spahi*, Ankers?" I countered.

"Better'n I'd expected, Captain," answered Lieutenant Ankers. "I'd figured a week from the time both of us first went over it, to seal her for blowing out, but now it looks as if Gatchell and Lynch and a few of the other boys'll have her ready day after tomorrow. That'll be only six days."

That sounded fine. I turned to Lieutenant Reitzel who was on the float also, to inquire of him what luck he had had in scouting up more air compressors. He had located several. Under Army orders, they could all be commandeered for the job. The French owners would be paid, of course, for their use (and I might add, knowing our policy and having some inkling already of French owners, quite handsomely, I was sure).

It seemed on adding up capacities, between the *King Salvador's* own air compressors and those we could hire, we should have about 1000 cubic feet of compressed air a minute. That was air enough to expel the sea from the *Spahi* at the rate of about 12 tons a minute or 720 tons an hour—if she didn't leak any, which of course she would. It wasn't any wealth of compressed air, but it would do. I told Reitzel to make arrangements to have the compressors delivered next day on the quay alongside the *King Salvador*, which would take them all aboard, and when we were ready, come out over the *Spahi* to handle the whole air compressor job from her decks.

Meanwhile, looking round from the nearly awash float which was all Ankers had been able to find to work from, I tried to visualize the situation in the water below me.

Two hundred feet farther out toward the northern breakwater forming the sea side of the artificial harbor, rose the masts and the stack of the *Pigeon*, sunk right side up, with her hull wholly submerged and her stern toward us. The tip of the *Pigeon's* flag-staff aft on her very stern, barely protruding from the water, accurately marked where her stern lay, the obstacle on the far side to entering the harbor.

Beneath my feet as I stood on the float, lay the *Spahi* on her starboard side, the obstacle on the landward side of the harbor,

her bow toward the *Pigeon*'s stern and clear of it by about thirty feet.

Ankers had found by diving and by careful sounding, that a semi-channel, usable for light draft vessels, still existed into Oran harbor. It existed by virtue of the peculiar way the *Pigeon* and the *Spahi* lay with regard to each other. The thirty foot clear gap between the two was, of course, much too narrow to permit any vessel to pass. The average freighter has a beam of about sixty feet, and for safety needs some side clearance in addition, no matter how carefully handled.

However, the *Spahi*, fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on what purpose one was aiming at) lay flat on her starboard side, not right side up. And because she lay on her side, her stem, now horizontal and only thirty feet from the *Pigeon*, was only half as far from the bottom of Oran harbor as was her high port side amidships where she was broadest of beam. Over the low horizontal stem of the *Spahi*, there still was water enough for any ship to pass. Somewhere on her curving port side, widening out and rising toward the surface between stem and midships line, there was a point deep enough to allow a lightly loaded freighter, drawing not over twenty feet, to pass without touching the *Spahi*'s capsized port side. The question was, was that point also far enough away from the *Pigeon*'s stern to take the full beam and a few feet more for clearance of a Liberty ship, which class formed most of our freighters?

Ankers' diving examinations and his soundings before my arrival, had proved that it was. He had buoyed both sides of that channel, the *Pigeon* side and the *Spahi* side, by two markers between which with great care a half-loaded Liberty could be brought in without stranding herself either on the *Spahi* or on the *Pigeon*. Of course, after complete unloading in the inner harbor, she could get out to sea again even more easily.

That was the existing condition at the entrance to Oran's inner harbor. As a consequence, fully loaded Libertys, drawing some twenty-eight feet of water as they approached Oran after their ocean crossing from America, had to anchor in the outer harbor. There, with great delay and no proper facilities for freight han-

dling, they had first to unload and lighter onto barges perhaps half their cargoes of urgently needed munitions, equipment, and supplies for Eisenhower's troops. When they had lightened themselves thus down to around twenty feet, they could be cautiously piloted over the stem of the *Spahi* into the inner harbor, where the remainder of their cargoes could then swiftly be unloaded by the harbor quayside cranes and the excellent cargo handling equipment and labor battalions our Army had brought to Oran.

With shipping scarce and U-boats doing a highly successful job in 1942 in making it even scarcer, the tie-up in the outer harbor and the delay in unloading at Oran amounted to having a sizable additional number of freighters sunk each week. Consequently getting the *Spahi* clear of the entrance was vital; getting her swiftly clear was urgent. I felt happier over the prospect of getting the *Spahi* out of there in two more days than I had over seeing the *Porcupine* come safely into harbor—it was of greater importance to the whole war effort. And I told Ankers so.

Leaving Ankers with his divers, Harding, Reitzel, and I went ashore, where Harding boarded his ship and I started to leave myself to go back to my billet. Reitzel stopped me, handed me a typewritten report he'd written, asked if I'd mind looking it over.

I looked at it. It was an intelligence report, giving in some detail recent data on what was going on in French circles in Oran, and it certainly waved a red flag respecting actions which denoted a marked lack of enthusiasm in some of the top figures in the French naval command for real co-operation in the Allied cause. I was no intelligence expert, but it seemed important to me. I looked up inquiringly at Reitzel after hastily scanning it.

"I wanted your opinion on whether I should turn that in, Captain," he explained.

"I don't see why not, Reitzel, though that's no longer your job. If what you say here is true, it looks important to me."

"It's true, all right," Reitzel assured me.

"It's O.K. with me then. Turn it in."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Reitzel. "I'll send it right along."

We parted, Reitzel in his ramshackle collection of French junk to see about getting the compressors delivered, I in my jeep to do

some more work towards setting up at least a semblance of a salvage organization in the ports to the eastward of Oran.

Having no other office (and, of course, no yeomen nor other office help at all, nor any typewriter) I turned to in my cramped room at the Grand Hotel on writing longhand letters. First came some instructions and encouragement to Lt. Comdr. White, already among the bombs in Bône and facing a tough task there practically bare-handed. A few British divers had been raked out of the British forces afloat; they should shortly report to him if they hadn't already. And I was sending him a little other salvage equipment, some from the *King Salvor*, more that had been arranged for in Algiers to be turned over to him by the Royal Engineers. But it wasn't much; I could send him mainly only my faith in him and my best wishes till my salvage squadron arrived from the Red Sea and we really had decent equipment to work with.

Then more instructions to the other assistants I had picked up. In Algiers, I had been given two young British lieutenants, both earnest enough but of little salvage experience. In Philippeville, I had another British youngster, Lt. Strange, little better off for acquaintanceship with his job but struggling wholeheartedly on it. In Bougie, a bad spot, I had nobody, but I intended to send there the *King Salvor's* sister, the *Salvestor*, whose arrival I was optimistically expecting any day. At any rate, I could write to my British assistants at Bône, at Philippeville, and at Algiers to let them know they weren't forgotten and to cheer them a little with the thought of all the salvage gear aboard those three ships circumnavigating the Cape of Good Hope from Massawa in the Red Sea. (I never learned till much later that not one of those ships had yet left Massawa and that the first one didn't even get started till practically January.)

By the time I had those letters all written, it was evening and time for dinner. I climbed down a few flights of stairs to the mezzanine to the special dining room run as a mess for the American naval officers stationed in Oran. Dinner, a fairly boisterous event with most of the naval staff present, was the one relief in the usually hectic day, since the conversation, for security reasons due to the French civilian waiters, was always on home (meaning, of course,

the girls we'd left behind us, married or unmarried), never the ordinary shop talk of the war either by land or by sea. This evening was no exception, save at its end. As I was leaving the dining room, one of the other captains drew me aside.

"Say, Ellsberg, can I talk to you about that intelligence report your Lieutenant Reitzel turned in this afternoon?"

"Why, certainly," I replied. "I gave him permission. I'm no judge, but it looked like hot stuff to me. What about it?"

"Just this. Will you tell him he's to lay off intelligence for good? He's been warned already; maybe you can make him believe it and keep him out of trouble. Do him a favor and convince him it's meant, if he wants to stick around here, and maybe avoid a court for disobedience of orders besides. Intelligence is being handled otherwise. Here's that report he turned in. Mind giving it back to him and telling him he's to lay off? This is unofficial, but it's the straight dope from the top down and the last word before the ax falls."

I took the report, thanked him for the tip, promised to convey it and do my best to make Reitzel, over whom I had no actual authority, see it. I climbed the stairs back to my room deeply puzzled. What could there be so different about the ramifications of intelligence that made a serious report, no matter what the source, unwelcome? It was all beyond me. But it was nevertheless perfectly clear Reitzel was going to have to stop or, without any gain to anybody, there'd be trouble both for him and for me—for him, because he'd certainly be shipped home, if nothing worse; and for me, because I'd lose him when he was adaptable enough to be of considerable help to me in many ways in salvage. And heaven alone knew how badly I needed help in every way. Even a fresh-caught seaman, *2c*, as a messenger boy, would have been highly welcome, and Reitzel's capabilities were infinitely above that. I hoped he'd see the light and lay off, difficult as it might be for him with his training to ignore what was going on in Oran under his very nose.

Next morning early I caught Reitzel on the quay and passed the word along to him, at the same time returning his report. His face fell.

"I'm sorry, Reitzel. I can't understand it any more than you do, but do me a favor and quit," I begged. "At least that way you'll still be able to do your bit with the salvage gang. Otherwise you'll get nowhere at all and catch it in the neck besides. I'd hate to see that."

Reitzel swallowed the blow, promised me faithfully he'd do nothing more in intelligence, no matter what he learned. We separated, Reitzel to shepherd the hired compressors down to quay, I to board the *King Salvor* and check Harding's arrangements to secure them to his deck for use next day.

Within two hours, Reitzel had broken his solemn promise to lay off intelligence. He came rushing back to me on the salvage quay, full of what he had put together out of a few stray bits of casual information picked up from some French stevedores, and was pouring it into my ear. Immediately I was boiling with rage, but not at Reitzel, to whom I felt deeply grateful. In a moment, madder than hell, I was on my way to see the American Captain of the Port.

For what Reitzel had deduced was that the French *Commandant du Port* was arranging to bring the French passenger ship *Ardois* into the inner harbor that afternoon. She was a large but completely empty and light Mediterranean passenger vessel which had been brought from some other minor port to Oran after its capture, and had since been lying there idle with no steam up, moored in the outer harbor. Now the French were preparing that afternoon to tow her through the gap between the *Pigeon* and the *Spahi* into the inner harbor for some purpose Reitzel had been unable to learn, but which obviously could not be of any great immediate importance.

I was determined it shouldn't be done. The *Ardois* was much broader in the beam than any Liberty and required more clearance for safe passage. Besides she was much longer and much higher out of water than the Liberties and consequently considerably more difficult for tugs to handle with any assurance in the tight channel. That any French pilot and the tugs available would bring the *Ardois* through without hitting something I considered highly unlikely.

Whether the *Ardois* herself got hurt was none of my business, and about what happened to the scuttled *Pigeon*, I cared even less. But if the *Spahi*, which we were preparing to raise within two days, was damaged in her watertightness by collision with the *Ardois* and we consequently couldn't raise her, that was my business—it was everybody's business from General Eisenhower's and Admiral Cunningham's on down. Nobody was going to gamble with our chances of quick removal of the harbor bottleneck stopper, just to get a French passenger ship which hadn't done anything for months and wouldn't do anything for months more yet, from the outer to the inner harbor a few days sooner. Let them wait till we had the *Spahi* out of there—after that the French could take whatever they pleased through; so could anybody—even the *Queen Mary* could safely pass then.

Once again my jeep leaped like a mountain goat from pothole to pothole as it took the bumps racing down the road to the Port Captain's office at the head of the harbor. Unceremoniously I burst in on him to ask whether he knew if the *Ardois* were to be shifted inside that afternoon. He looked blankly at me; his office had heard nothing of it. He would inquire. An aide called by telephone the office of the *Commandant du Port*, in a few minutes reported yes, it was so. But we needn't concern ourselves; the French were handling the matter themselves completely as she was a French vessel, they were using their own tugs and pilot, and (implied but not so stated) Oran was a French port so why not? He hung up.

I explained to the Port Captain, a four-striper very much junior to me, why not. He saw the point, himself called the *Commandant du Port*, the gentleman who had scuttled everything in the harbor, to request him to wait a few days. There ensued a lively conversation in French, but I suspected my request was falling on very unsympathetic ears.

When the Port Captain finally hung up and again turned to me, he confirmed my suspicions. The *Commandant du Port* refused to delay the movement of the *Ardois*—all preparations had been made on the ship, with the tugs, with the pilot, at the berth inside the harbor. But we need have no cause for worry; the *Commandant du Port* had every confidence in his French pilot who had assured him

it was easy—there was no danger.

I swallowed none of it. I had seen over-confident pilots before strand ships in tight places. In fact, I had learned by sad experience that the more confidence in himself and the less fear of the hidden dangers a pilot exhibited, the less confidence I was entitled to put in his ability to avoid them. I told the Port Captain it wouldn't do, I wasn't having any part in gambles. As he was as Port Captain responsible for ship movements, he must stop it. He could go to Rear Admiral Bennett, he could go to the French vice admiral (the *Commandant du Port*'s one and only superior), but the *Ardois* must not be moved till we had cleared the *Spahi* out of the entrance. I'd leave it to him. But he must bear in mind that stopping the *Ardois* was very important.

I went back to the salvage quay, where the commandeered air compressors were beginning to be delivered in army trucks. One by one, Harding picked them off the trucks with his cargo boom forward, and swung them aboard the *King Salvor*'s forecastle. I watched, never getting far from the salvage shack on the quay, where our solitary telephone was installed. The morning slipped away, there were no calls. Distrustful of how matters might be going, I called the Port Captain's office myself shortly before noon.

I learned Rear Admiral Bennett was working on the problem, endeavoring to persuade the French vice admiral to delay the movement. There was no decision yet; the vice admiral wanted to discuss it further with Capitaine de Frégate Duprès, his *Commandant du Port*. We should know early in the afternoon.

I had lunch on the *King Salvor* with Harding, Ankers, and Reitzel. To all of us, what might happen to the *Spahi* if the *Ardois* were brought through was of first importance. I brought the others up to the minute on the situation. Reitzel listened, frankly pessimistic. He knew best the personalities involved.

"I tell you, Captain," he said bitterly, "the *Ardois* will move. That French vice admiral is a complete nonentity; Duprès will wind him round his little finger and do what he pleases. Duprès is the French high command around here. Unless Bennett can issue a flat order stopping it, the *Ardois* will move because Duprès wants to move her."

"Why," I queried, "should Dupr s insist? Why can't he wait a few days? Who's hurt by any delay?"

Reitzel shrugged his shoulders,

"Who knows Dupr s' motives? But the *Ardois* will move."

Reitzel was correct. A little before one o'clock, I got a telephone call so informing me. Admiral Bennett had done his best in persuasion, but unsuccessfully. The French insisted. I must remember the French were our friends and allies, Oran was not occupied enemy territory, we could not order them to do or not to do anything. Short of issuing a peremptory order and then backing it up by force, which would cause widespread repercussions all over North Africa in our relations with the French, Bennett could do nothing further. We must hope the French pilot was as good as he claimed and that no damage to the *Spahi* resulted. The *Ardois* would move at 2 P.M. Sorry.

I hung up the telephone, went back aboard the *King Salvor* to break the bad news, reflecting cynically on the old adage,

"God save me from my friends; my enemies I can take care of myself!"

Long before 2 P.M., every officer in the salvage party was out on the diving float over the *Spahi*. Diving was discontinued, the float itself hauled well away from the channel toward the *Spahi*'s stern to keep it out of danger. Beyond in the outer harbor, we could see the French tugs puffing round the *Ardois*, getting their lines aboard. At 2 P.M. as per schedule, the *Ardois* cast loose, the tugs began heaving. After some pushing and hauling, they got her swung about, pointed fair for the channel, started her for the narrow entrance.

They hadn't far to go, not over a quarter of a mile, so our anxiety in watching didn't last long. It was perfectly obvious as she came on that the pilot, whether intentionally or not, was holding her over to port, away from the sunken *Pigeon* whose masts and stack he could see, and towards the *Spahi*, of which he could see nothing whatever save the marker buoy over her indicating the limit there of safe navigation.

In a few minutes more, there was nothing for it but to watch in horror as the massive *Ardois* came on, so far out of the center of the

safe channel that it did not seem possible it could be by accident. On she came, light and high out of water, towering majestically far above us, looking like the biggest ocean liner afloat. She couldn't miss the *Spahi* below her now.

She didn't.

Not fifty feet from where we stood on the float, we heard a grating and a screeching and the noise of tearing steel as the protruding port bilge keel of the *Ardois* cut into the submerged *Spahi*'s side. Simultaneously the *Ardois* slowed, lost her momentum, came swiftly dead in the water in spite of the laboring tugs. She was stranded hard and fast on the torn *Spahi*.

Far up on the bridge of *Ardois*, now nearly abreast us, I could see the French pilot, blowing his whistle and waving both arms for the tugs to stop heaving ahead, to start hauling her astern. On the float Ankers, Harding, Reitzel, and I looked at each other, livid. About us the divers and the mechanics who had struggled to make the *Spahi* watertight and airtight were shaking their fists at the pilot above, wholeheartedly and obscenely cursing him.

The tugs ahead stopped pulling, those astern started to heave madly. There came again through the water the screech of tearing steel, a sound causing us to whom the *Spahi* meant so much as keen anguish as if it were our own bleeding bodies that were being cut to pieces by the relentless *Ardois*. With some difficulty, the *Ardois* was dragged free and about a hundred yards astern.

There the pilot straightened her up again, a little more now to the starboard side of the channel, and came on once more. This time, as he might as well have done the first time had he so intended, he came squarely down the middle of the marked channel, passed clear of the *Pigeon* and over the bow of the *Spahi* without touching either, and continued on up the inner harbor to his assigned berth beyond the Môle Millerand. There, I presume, he was able to report,

"Mission accomplished," or whatever its equivalent was in French.

As for us, we dragged the diving float back to its working position, Ankers dressed one of his divers, sent him down below to learn what had happened to the *Spahi*. In about half an hour the diver

was back on the float, his helmet off, describing what he had found. He had walked or crawled all over the port side of her hull, her high side. There was, thank God, only one hole in her uppermost side, but that was bad enough. It was about two yards wide, rather long, with the edges of the remaining steel plates badly jagged.

Ankers and I looked glumly at each other. The *Spahi* would now no more than a sieve, hold any of the air from the compressors we had been gathering up. We would not raise the *Spahi* and clear the harbor entrance next day. We couldn't tell yet how long it might be before we could get that gaping opening in the hitherto undamaged side of the *Spahi* patched reasonably airtight so we could proceed with her removal. But there would be a substantial delay. Ankers put the helmet back on his diver, sent him down again to get more accurate measurements of the hole and a better idea of the broken steel around it, so we might go to work on figuring out how to patch it. I went up the harbor road to make a vitriolic report to our local top command as to what had happened and to demand that the French pilot at least be permanently disqualified and imprisoned for gross incompetence, if not shot out of hand, as seemed well warranted, for deliberate wartime sabotage.

A few days went by. Ankers and his divers struggled in the chilling water below, lacing reinforcing steel over the new hole in the *Spahi*, building a large wooden form to hold the cement that we would pour all over the cavity to form a thick patch which we earnestly hoped would prove reasonably tight when the compressed air was pumped in. We had neither the means nor the material to burn away underwater the jagged and bent edges of the broken steel below and fit a tight steel patch.

A continuous stream of oaths enveloped our diving float—no diver went down without first cursing the pilot who was the cause, nor came up after tangling with the sharp edges of the broken steel which the *Ardois* had left without cursing him even more luridly. Nor was this situation helped any when we learned the second day that that pilot was continuing actively to pilot—the only punishment he got (if he really got that even) was a slap on the wrist in the form of an oral admonition from Capitaine de

Frégate Duprès that he must be more careful in the future.

Four days from the accident went by. It was now mid-December and increasingly cold. By working inhuman hours in the cold and foul harbor waters off that dismal float, Ankers and his men, driving themselves feverishly, finished the interlacing steel, completed the wooden form to hold the cement for the patch. Reitzel had somewhere commandeered a cement mixer and procured the necessary quick-setting cement and gravel. That fifth afternoon we would mix and pour the cement. Giving the cement two days after that to set, we hoped on the seventh day, a week later now than we had anticipated originally, to raise the *Spahi*, clear the entrance, and be free then to go about other urgent wartime business.

The morning of the fifth day, Reitzel came to me with more bad news. He had been keeping an eye on the *Ardois* at her new berth in the inner harbor. He had learned that about the middle of that morning, the French were going to move her from there, were, of all things, preparing to take her back to her former berth in the outer harbor! Who was to pilot her out, he didn't know.

I practically exploded. How could they think of such a thing, when it was well known all over Oran that in a few days we should be ready to lift the *Spahi*? Certainly this time the *Ardois* could wait. Had I had time and some decent means of quick communication, I should have wasted no more breath on anyone in Oran, but gone immediately with the news to Admiral Cunningham or General Eisenhower in Algiers. They would stop it. But there was next to no time, and the communications between Oran and Algiers were heart-breakingly slow.

Once again I did what I could. Practically with tears in my eyes I pleaded with the American high command in Oran that this time they stop it, no matter what it took. The results were nothing. After more conversation, couched I suppose in the friendliest of diplomatic phrases, the French authorities informed us that the *Ardois* would be moved, and on top of that, to show their complete faith in him, by the very pilot who had handled (or rather, mishandled) her the first time! And such were the lengths to which they were willing to go in maintaining Allied cordiality, the American top authorities took it, even to the pilot! I was informed shortly

that the *Ardois* would move again, piloted as before.

My diving crew all looked at me incredulously as I came back, completely broken in spirit, to inform the men on the float that the *Ardois*, in charge of the same pilot, would be along in about an hour. And incredulity was not the only thing evident in their eyes. What sort of salvage officer could I be to ask them to wear themselves out, risking their lives below, and then hazard the fruits of their dangers to satisfy the stupidity or the vanity or worse of some pigheaded, gold-laced ex-saboteurs and their tool of a pilot? But nobody said anything. Silently, though unquestionably boiling inwardly, the seamen set to work to cast the diving float, all ready with its cement mixer to pour the cement, adrift and haul it clear from its working position towards the shore.

Nearly a mile away, up toward the head of the harbor, we could see the stern of the *Ardois* slowly coming clear of her berth. Since on this occasion her run to the entrance was much longer than before, so correspondingly was our period of suffering as we watched her approach. But, I thought, there is one gain. The pilot will have time to gather greater speed before he has to run the tight channel, and that will give him better steering and better control of his ship. This time, if he's any good at all, he has a better chance to make it on the first try. I started to pray.

Closer came the *Ardois* and the tugs ahead. Being a little to one side of the channel, I was not in a very good position with the ship far off to judge exactly of her course, when every single foot one way or the other was important. A half mile off, there was still no telling. A quarter of a mile away, and in spite of the chilly air I began to sweat. She was again, I was sure, too far to starboard; too far over, that was, toward the *Spahi* once more. But possibly the pilot intended soon to swing her more to port; there was still room. An eighth of a mile now, and she showed not the slightest sign yet of swinging to port toward the *Pigeon*; it was getting late. The last hundred yards and there was no longer any question—it was too late now to swing to port, the *Ardois* was, if anything, farther off course and away from the center of the channel than she had been five days before, she was coming straight on at higher speed to smash into the *Spahi* a second time!

I couldn't stand it. I cupped my hands, shrieked out toward the pilot clearly visible on the high bridge approaching me,

"*God damn you! STOP HER! STOP HER!*"

Of course he couldn't hear me, nor so far as I knew, would it have made any difference to him if he had. On came the *Ardois*, crashed into the submerged *Spahi* again to come to a sudden stop amidst the high scream of rending steel to which the first time was nothing.

Not a sound came from the float—no curses, no nothing. We were all completely beyond the power of speech to express anything. In silence we stood on the float rocking in the wash of the straining tugs, looking helplessly up at the high sides of the Juggernaut which twice now had crushed our hopes.

Once again the pilot was blowing his whistle, waving his arms, signaling his tugs to haul him astern and clear. But this time they couldn't; he was hard aground on the *Spahi* and nothing the tugs could do would free him.

If it had been only for the pilot and the *Ardois*, they could have remained stranded there till hell froze over so far as anyone in the salvage forces was concerned. But they were stranded on the *Spahi*, and the longer the *Ardois* remained resting on her, the more damage to the *Spahi* was certain to result, especially if the *Ardois* swung appreciably. So in a few minutes, when it became clear the tugs were making no progress, Captain Harding went racing ashore to cast loose the *King Salvor* and take a hand.

Shortly the *King Salvor*, with her powerful engines specially designed for heavy towing, was also secured to the stern of the *Ardois*, throttles full out, aiding the tugs. With that added pull, the *Ardois* dragged free, and the *King Salvor* let go. At that point, the pilot straightened out his ship again, came on once more, and as if it were no trick at all, passed clear between the *Pigeon* and the *Spahi* to the outer harbor, where the *Ardois* was remoored in her old berth, there to remain motionless for weeks after.

The listless salvage party hauled the diving float back to its working position, dressed a diver, watched him go overboard to the *Spahi*. Shortly he was back on the float again, helmet off, to make his report. Apathetically we listened.

All trace of all our work on the patch—the reinforcing steel, the laboriously built wood form—was gone. There wasn't a sign left of any of it. Where it had been, there was now a real hole in the *Spahi's* steel side, twenty feet or more across each way, big enough to drive a General Sherman tank through without touching anything. The *Ardois* this time had done a thorough job.

No one was surprised, no one said anything. What else was to have been expected?

Ankers, whose huge hands were twitching as if he were aching to take that pilot in those paws of his and break him in two, ended the silence at last.

“There's only one way to take care of this, Captain. Get me a machine gun and lend me your jeep. I'll get right down to that French office and clean out the nest of 'em so this'll never happen to us again!”

But I had no machine gun.

C H A P T E R

15

LATE THAT AFTERNOON, I RECEIVED some reinforcements to lighten my gloom. My advance salvage party arrived by air from Massawa.

With little previous notice, the special army twin-motored Douglas transport which Admiral Cunningham had procured for the task, set down at Tafaraoui Airfield, bringing my men from the Red Sea. The same plane had carried them all the way across Africa from Eritrea to Oran. They weren't many, only eight men all told, but I welcomed them as long lost brothers. It was hardly over three weeks since I had left them in the burning heat of Massawa. It seemed three centuries.

There was Captain Bill Reed, my best salvage master; Lloyd Williams, salvage master mechanic, and a tower of strength in a pinch; little Buck Scougale and lithe Al Watson, two of the finest divers I ever saw; youthful Ervin Johnson, chunky Muzzy Bertolotti, and reserved Lew Whitaker, all hard-working divers and capable mechanics but not in a class with the other two; and Jim Buzbee, ace pump mechanic. I had specifically asked that Bill Reed and Lloyd Williams be sent by air; the others were all volunteers for immediate service in North Africa, but they were the best of the lot in Massawa. Reed could have had more, but eight men (with their equipment and the 60 cubic foot portable diving air compressor which I had enjoined Reed to bring in the plane with him and under no conditions to get separated from in transit) were all the army transport could lift into the air for the trip.

After practically kissing each man on both cheeks, I was that glad to see all of them, I looked inquisitively around for the

portable diving air compressor, a gem for the job. I saw nothing of it. Bill Reed, with his leathery countenance and his one good eye (for he had lost the sight of the other in a diving mishap) following my searching gaze, correctly interpreted the cause, and, blushing so fiery a red it showed even through his tanned cheeks, beat me to the punch.

"Cap'n," he said in much embarrassment, in a melodious voice contrasting oddly with his rugged physique, "that compressor ain't with us. But it'll be along soon," he added hastily. "I practically slept with that compressor in my arms all the way across Africa, just like you ordered, so nobody'd steal it from us. And I got it as far as Yum Dum. But at Yum Dum, the pilot had to take aboard so much extra gas so his plane could make the next long hop north across the Sahara, that he said we just had to leave the compressor behind or he couldn't lift her off the sand. I said to him, 'No soap,' just like you ordered, but he said, 'Then I guess we all stay here,' and we did.

"Well, after a while, seeing as we weren't getting anywhere, the pilot and I went to see the air force colonel commanding that field at Yum Dum and we laid our troubles before him. I said I wouldn't budge without the compressor and the pilot said his plane couldn't budge with it. So the colonel went to take a look at the compressor inside the plane, and then came right up with the answer. He said if I'd go without the compressor, he'd promise faithfully to see to it himself that compressor went north to you in Oran in the very next plane, no matter what else or who else had to be bumped off to make room for it. So seeing as he's a colonel, I took his word for it, and here we are without the compressor. It'll be along in a day or so."

I looked reproachfully at Reed. He was over sixty and had seen lots in his time.

"Bill," I said mournfully, "this is the first time you ever let me down. I thought you'd lived long enough to have more sense than to leave a beautiful compressor like that one where anybody in the air force could snap it up. Those birds just live on air in the air force, and that compressor's right up their alley; light enough for 'em to cart around in a plane from field to field, wherever they

need compressed air. And that's everywhere. We'll never see it again. You could sooner've trusted that colonel alone with your best girl friend than with that air compressor! Where in hell is Yum Dum and what's the name of that colonel? I'm going to radio General Eisenhower himself to get on the job right away to try and keep that colonel honest! And I'll bet you anything, Bill, even he fails on it!"

But Bill Reed couldn't help me much. He didn't know the name of the air force colonel, and all he knew about Yum Dum was that it was somewhere in the Senegalese sands of French West Africa, to the north of Roberts Field at Monrovia in Liberia, which was the last stop they had made before Yum Dum, and far to the south of Marrakeck in Morocco, which was where they had next come down. (Vichy French West Africa was now available to our planes, having joined the Allies at Darlan's orders since I had come to Algeria. Consequently Reed's plane had taken that longer semi-coastal West African route, rather than straight across the hump as I had, a route completely impossible to a twin-motored transport.)

With a sigh I turned the party over to the billeting officer to get them quartered somewhere in Oran. Next I got Reitzel on the job, first to locate Yum Dum, then to get the top brass hats in the Air Force working on the safe delivery of our air compressor.

Some strange things resulted. Reitzel couldn't locate Yum Dum on any map of Africa; neither, I am sorry to say, could anybody else in Algeria, whether American, French or British. And in spite of a diligent search of their air maps by Air Force Headquarters in Algiers, the Air Force (so they said) couldn't find any trace either of Yum Dum or of their field there so they could start tracing the compressor. Yet Reed and every man in his party solemnly swore it was no mirage—Yum Dum was real, so was the airfield, most of all the helpful colonel.

I may say here, we never saw the air compressor again. Often in the weeks to come, as I ached for that lovely diving air compressor, my pride and joy in every salvage job in Massawa, small enough to be rushed in a hurry to any emergency job, big enough when it got on the job to handle it, I began to wonder myself if Yum Dum wasn't a mirage in the Sahara after all and everything in connection

with the vanishing of my air compressor something out of the Arabian Nights. The only answer I received to my weekly needlings of Air Force Headquarters in Algiers about their inability to find their own airfields, let alone my lost compressor, was given with increasing asperity each time, that they hadn't found Yum Dum yet and thought anyway that a place with a name like that was just my perverted idea of a joke. Finally I gave up.

Long afterwards, in the last hour of my last night in Africa, I found myself at Roberts Field, Monrovia, to take off in sixty minutes for the Atlantic jump to Natal in Brazil. Talking casually with the Roberts Field Commandant over what was going on in the North African fighting, it came suddenly back to me that this was the last field from which Bill Reed claimed he had taken off going north, still in possession of that air compressor.

"Colonel," I asked, "is there a place anywhere to the north of here by the name of Yum Dum?"

"Why, certainly, Captain," he replied. "We've got a small airfield there. It's about 700 miles to the north of here."

So Yum Dum *was* real! Bill Reed (and all his gang) had been neither lying, drunk, nor hopped up on hashish after all.

"How're your communications with Yum Dum?" I inquired eagerly.

"Excellent! We've got a radio flight control circuit so we can get 'em in a minute."

The Roberts Field Commandant led me through the darkness to his communications room, reminded me that I had only fifty-five minutes left till the take-off of the four-engined Liberator, in which I was to depart, and to be sure to give myself time enough to get out on the field again and aboard. With that, he left me. He needn't have worried though about the time. I wasn't missing that plane home for all the air compressors that ever disappeared in Darkest Africa.

The wireless communications gadget was something you couldn't talk over, but messages went back and forth over it as on a teletype. The operator got Yum Dum in no time flat; but it took forty minutes after that to locate the colonel and get him to the machine at

the other end. I must talk fast.

"Are you really the Commanding Officer at Yum Dum?"

He assured me he was. He was at Yum Dum and he was commanding officer.

There was final confirmation! So I proceeded.

"Do you remember a diving air compressor left in your charge at Yum Dum about the middle of last December by some divers on their way by air from Massawa to Oran?"

There was a delay of some minutes while the colonel 700 miles away at the other end evidently digested all the implications of that one. Then the machine started to spell out the answer.

Yes, he had a vague recollection of some such piece of machinery. What about it?

"Where is it now?"

Another long delay while the colonel apparently racked his brains. I kept my eye glued to my watch.

He didn't know, but he'd have Yum Dum searched. Where should he inform me as to the results?

I had time for just one more comment before I left Africa and I gave it to him.

"I'm the man you stole that compressor from. You'd damned well better find it and ship it now to my old outfit at Allied Salvage Headquarters in Algiers where they're beginning to lose all faith in Air Force colonels. And if you know where Algiers is, for Christ's sake let your Headquarters there know where Yum Dum is so they can take your hide off. Good-by. Signed, Ellsberg."

I shoved that into the operator's hands, told him to send it as was, and dashed out of the communications office bound for my waiting plane and America.

Whether that wireless operator bowdlerized it or sent it intact, I never knew. What I did learn long afterward was that neither the air compressor nor any word of it ever showed up at Salvage Headquarters.

I doubt that the Air Force yet knows where Yum Dum is, or that it even exists or ever existed.

16

THE MORNING AFTER THEIR ARRIVAL, Reed and his whole gang were waiting for me, shivering in the chilly lobby of the Grand Hotel, when I came down.

"Say, Cap," announced Buck Scougale immediately on sighting me, "this is certainly one cold spot. I never dreamt any place in Africa could get like this. If I could only ship a plane load o' this refrigerated air here back to Massawa, I could sell it to the poor Eties there for enough so's I'd never have to make another dive!"

I grinned. When I had first arrived from Massawa, Oran had felt to me exactly like something next door to the North Pole. Now it was even colder. I sympathized with my shorn lambs from the Red Sea who had no winter clothing to temper the blasts for them. Nor had I either.

"Boys," I said, "I've been thinking of it myself for some time and now we'll all do it together. We'll go up to the army small stores near here and buy ourselves some woolen O.D.s, some of that heavy ankle length wool underwear, and a load of wool socks. After that, we'll all look like G.I.s, but we'll feel warmer, so what's the odds?"

We did, and what was more, we stripped to our skins and put the outfits on right in the army small stores before we emerged again to meet the wintry wind. I came out dressed in a suit of thick woolen underwear reaching from my wrists to my ankles, something I had no recollection of ever having worn since I was a small child, if then. And to complete the picture, I was cased in wool O.D. trousers, a woolen O.D. shirt and jacket, a wool-lined army windbreaker, and heavy tan G.I. shoes. There wasn't a thing navy

left about my rig except the crossed-anchor insignia on my khaki-covered brass hat; even the silver eagles on my collar were similar to army ones. From then on, every G.I. I ever ran into, wholly ignoring my cap insignia, addressed me as "Colonel." But as I was at least warm and more comfortable at last, and as apparently they didn't take me for an air force colonel, I took it as philosophically as possible and went my way.

When the last of the crowd was padded sufficiently to his taste or to the thinness of his blood, and we had all drifted out to the street, the little knot of men looked inquiringly at me.

"Well, Captain," asked Lloyd Williams, "where do we go from here?"

"Boys," I answered, "it's only about a week now till Christmas and I've been saving up something very special here as a Christmas present for you. I've got a scuttled floating dry dock for you to raise!"

"Another scuttled dry dock?" Bill Reed's one good eye lighted up like a lighthouse. "I ain't raised a scuttled dry dock for a couple o' months now. Oh, boy, lead me to it! Is it a big one, Cap'n?" he finished eagerly.

"Twenty-five thousand tons, Bill!" I answered. "This one is a honey. Bigger'n both of those dry docks put together that you raised in Massawa. This'll be a job you can tell your grandchildren about!"

From all around, eager questions flew at me. How deep down was she? What was her damage? Where was she lying? What did I think about how long it'd take? And finally, what did I have in Oran for them to work with? For every man of them was as excited as Bill Reed over the prospect of another dry dock. They had raised two terribly blasted but badly needed dry docks from the bottom of Massawa harbor in miraculously short time with next to no equipment to work with; tasks which British salvage experts had declared impossible. But they had done it, and it was heart-warming to see the faith they had in themselves to do the like again.

I shrugged off all the questions, merely telling them we'd all get a boat and go out over her and they could see. With five of us

crowded into my jeep, leaving four for a second trip, we started for the waterfront.

The scuttled dry dock situation in Oran was very scrambled. There had been three floating dry docks before the surrender—the Grand Dock, of 25,000 tons capacity, a monster of a dock; the Moyen Dock, of 4200 tons capacity; and the Petit Dock of 2000 tons capacity. All three had been scuttled by orders of Capitaine de Frégate Duprès, but no two in the same way.

The Petit Dock must have been scuttled first, simply by opening its flood valves, as the French were then doing on all the ships being scuttled, and letting it go down. But to the dismay of the French saboteurs, when the Petit Dock hit bottom and quit sinking, the water under her at her quayside berth was so shallow it let her sink only a few feet more than her normal submergence in dry docking operations, leaving the tops of all her side compartments with the pump control gear still above the surface. The Petit Dock, in spite of their efforts at scuttling it, was no worse off than if it had been submerged a few feet more than usual to take aboard an extra deep draft vessel.

I can imagine Duprès gnashing his teeth over that unexpected set-up. He couldn't sink the Petit Dock any farther; there just wasn't water enough under it. And he hadn't time, with Fredendall's troops about to burst into Oran, to pump it up again and blast holes in its bottom, really to damage it. He had to let it lie.

About all Ankers and his men had to do (once matters in Oran had settled enough for them to look around at something else than the ships blocking the entrance) to raise the Petit Dock, was to reconnect the electric cables for power from the shore, start up the Petit Dock's own electric pumps, and pump her up, all of which took only a few hours. Since then the Petit Dock, which could lift nothing larger than a destroyer, had been continuously in use. In fact, that very morning it was occupied by the torpedoed *Porcupine*. After we had finished salvaging her, she had promptly been towed around heavily convoyed, from Arzeu to Oran and dry docked.

Capitaine de Frégate Duprès, having been baffled in the scuttling of the Petit Dock, had immediately changed his tactics in scuttling

the other two. It was obvious that the Moyen Dock, just offshore from the Petit Dock and a trifle east of it, was also in water too shallow to make its sinking a sure job. For successful sabotage, it couldn't simply be sunk either. So instead, with fiendish ingenuity, Dupr s and his assistants had flooded only one side of the Moyen Dock and not the other, so that it had capsized nearly 90° and gone down on its port side. And to make matters worse, the French submarine *Dana * which some weeks previously had been dry docked for overhaul in the Moyen Dock, had promptly rolled off the keel blocks when the latter capsized, and capsizing itself, had gone down with the dry dock, rolling to port. So there we had two wrecks, one on top of the other; the *Dana * sunken and capsized nestling against the capsized and sunken port side of the Moyen Dock which was nestling in the mud below. The *Commandant du Port* must have rubbed his hands in glee over that bit of sabotage—it was a veritable gem.

With that achievement to his credit, Capitaine de Fr gate Dupr s had evidently turned his attention next to the 25,000 ton Grand Dock, by far the biggest dry dock in all North Africa. Where it lay, across the harbor from all the piers, clear of everything, and not far from the breakwater forming the seawall on the deep north side of the artificially enclosed main harbor, it was in water deep enough to have sunk anything afloat without any qualms over the results. The harbor there was over twelve fathoms deep, very deep water for any harbor in the world. But in view of his fiasco with the Petit Dock, Dupr s wasn't taking any chances on sinking the Grand Dock for a full due. To the success of the Allied cause this was unquestionably the most important floating object in all North Africa, infinitely more valuable than any superdreadnought or superliner. So aside from opening all the many huge flood valves in the dry dock for swiftly sinking it, he exploded several charges of TNT against its port side, possibly with the thought of capsizing it as well as sinking it.

Whatever the intention, the Grand Dock had promptly submerged completely in the deepest water in Oran harbor with several holes blasted in its port side, but still right side up. And there it lay on the bottom, waiting for us, a Christmas present for

my men from Massawa. I had not actually let it wait for them; that was the task on which I had turned to Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard and all his French salvage outfit when I had so abruptly broken them off *la Bretagne* about ten days before. But they weren't making much progress; it was a big job and the war in the Mediterranean would be over at the rate they were going before they ever raised the Grand Dock. We needed it much sooner if we were to keep up with the larger vessels torpedoed in the Mediterranean, for which there were no other docking facilities anywhere in North Africa.

When all eight of Reed's little salvage party had been collected on the quay, I took them out in one of the *King Salvor's* boats. We passed over the wreck of the *Hartland* and close by the diving float, where I waved to Lieutenant Ankers and his men, just starting again to build another reinforced steel concrete patch, a vastly bigger one this time, over the enlarged hole in the *Spahi*. The patch now would have to be about as big as the side of a house and would take much longer to install than the first one. The new divers gazed curiously at the scene; Al Watson asked me if they were likely to have to lend a hand on that job also.

"No, Al," I informed him. "Red Gatchell and George Lynch, who are doing most of the diving on her, know that *Spahi* like a book by now. All they and their shipmates need in the way of help at present is a battleship to sink that bucket there" (I pointed to the *Ardois* lying in the outer harbor) "if she starts again to come within a mile of 'em." And as we chugged along down the harbor, I explained why.

"Twice already, you say, Cap?" exclaimed wiry little Buck Scougale in surprise when I had finished. "And they ain't shot that French pilot yet? Don't they know there's a war on? What're they waiting for?"

I was unable to say, unless it was to give him a third chance at the *Spahi*, should that be necessary. That pilot's case, I knew, was once more up before Capitaine de Frégate Duprès and I feared the worst—with Duprès as sole judge, the result would most likely be only another slap on the wrist. And that was exactly what resulted; the pilot even this time was given only a thirty day sus-

pension. When I learned of it that afternoon, I warned Ankers that the battered *Spahi*, come hell or high water, *must* be patched up and out of there before that thirty days suspension was up.

We continued on across the inner harbor till well over on the far side. There, about half way down towards the Môle Millerand, was the largest spot of water in Oran harbor uncluttered by any masts or stacks sticking up through the surface. I told the coxswain to stop the boat. Beneath us, with nothing showing above water to mark it, lay the largest wreck of all—the Grand Dock. Eagerly all hands leaned over the gunwales to peer into the water below, but nothing was visible, she was too far down.

Instructing the coxswain to get underway again dead slow, so as not to roil the surface, I had him go along over where I estimated the port side of the dock should lie. There were some control room superstructures on top that side; they might be close enough to the surface to be visible. So it proved. Soon we made out in the water ahead the tip of a flagstaff rising from the deckhouse about amidships of the high port side. In fact, the ball on the top of that tall flagstaff was so close to the surface we had to sheer the boat sharply out to avoid hitting it. Coming to rest again close by, some fifteen or twenty feet under the surface we could vaguely see the top of the deckhouse itself, seeming to dissolve into the deeper water below as we tried to follow its outlines further down. That was all we ever saw from the surface of the Grand Dock.

I broke out a blueprint of the dock, which I had obtained from the French. Huddled amidships over a thwart in the boat, all hands scanned that blueprint. It was a vast dock, 720 feet long, 140 feet wide, 60 feet high—long enough to take aboard two full-length football fields placed end to end, wider than the widest ship ever built, from top to bottom as high as a six story building. That was what we had to raise from the bottom of the deepest hole in Oran harbor.

After everyone had examined that plan to his heart's content, at somewhat higher speed we got the boat underway again and made several trips back and forth over the wreck below, but without being able to make out any more of it anywhere. Then with all hands in the boat decidedly more sober, we started back for the

quay at Môle Ravin Blanc. It was a big dock; it would be a big job. Ordinarily all the salvage resources of a nation and dozens of divers backed up by hundreds of mechanics would be thrown in on it to insure its accomplishment.

Nobody spoke. Each man of the eight from Massawa, comprising practically all the divers and skilled mechanics available for the task, seemed sunk in his own thoughts, pondering how it might be tackled. I took that moment to answer the question I had ducked when it had been thrown at me a few hours before in front of the army small stores—what did I have in Oran for them to work with?

"I'm sorry to say, boys, there isn't really anything at all to work with here. It's lucky you brought your own diving suits with you in the plane from Massawa—I couldn't even fit you out with suits here. What we'll do for a diving air compressor for your air, now we've lost your compressor at Yum Dum, I don't know. I'll try to steal something off the *King Salvor* that'll serve. And as for the shiploads of salvage equipment we ought to have for this job, there just isn't any at all in Oran. And what's worse, they won't give us any from home because the Mediterranean is an area of British responsibility; we can't get any from the British because they just haven't got it; and as for the French—well, the Nazis have so thoroughly looted everything portable in North Africa in the way of machinery and tools, the poor Frenchmen here have got hardly a screw left, let alone a screwdriver. You're going to have to do this job with next to nothing but your wits. Don't fool yourselves it'll be any way else. You mustn't even expect much help from the *King Salvor* over there. She's a standby for the *Spahi* job, but I can't tie her up on this task; she's got to be free to go to sea on a minute's notice when a ship gets torpedoed off here, and I can't load anything more on her. So that's the story about your Christmas present, boys. She's all yours now."

"Well, Captain," said Lloyd Williams laconically, "hell itself is better'n Massawa, and this place at least has got something on hell. When do we start?"

"Tomorrow morning, Lloyd. Bright and early."

C H A P T E R

17

THAT AFTERNOON WAS SPENT IN salvage conferences, two of them, one after another, in the *King Salvor's* wardroom.

The first was on the *Spahi* situation, though attended also by Bill Reed and Lloyd Williams, whom I introduced for the first time to Ankers, Harding, and Reitzel. From opposite sides of Africa, the strong men of salvage from the East and from the West had met at last. The two little groups studied each other intently, wondering, no doubt, how good these strangers really were. Then we got down to brass tacks on the *Spahi*, still our major headache.

Ankers figured it would take him two weeks to build the much larger and more complicated patch now required, and a few days more after that for the cement in the patch to harden sufficiently so we could dare subject it to compressed air. After that, we could try to lift the *Spahi*.

I nodded in approval. It would be fine if Ankers could do it that swiftly. Then I proceeded to pour a little sand into the gears of his time schedule. I had estimated before that we might float the *Spahi* off the bottom by expelling the water from the upper third of her down to the line of the upper edge of her now vertical cargo deck hatches, at which point air would escape to the sea and we could trap no more. That much buoyancy, I had figured, would take care of her deadweight and the cargo of hogsheads of wine with which she was loaded. But I had previously overlooked something in my calculations; the fault was mine.

I had figured the cargo as really of no weight at all to be lifted, because at all stages of the operation, the *Spahi* would remain prac-

tically wholly submerged even when lifted, and so of course would her cargo inside. And submerged, the buoyancy of a hogshead of wine practically equaled its weight—in other words, each hogshead of wine was floating its own heft down there in the *Spahi*. That was all right so long as the hogsheads *were* submerged, which, so far as about two thirds of her cargo was concerned, would always be the case in lifting the *Spahi* till her port side barely showed on the surface. But it decidedly wasn't going to be so respecting the remaining third of her cargo, and the weight of that third was enough to prevent us from lifting the *Spahi* off the bottom at all as I had hoped. I should have seen that originally but I hadn't.

For it had recently dawned on me that as we pumped air into the upper third of the *Spahi* and trapped it there to provide buoyancy to lift her by forcing the water out of her through the cargo hatches lower down, all the hogsheads of wine in that upper third would no longer be in water but would be in compressed air, even though the *Spahi* as a whole was still completely submerged. And being surrounded only by air, those hogsheads would once again be exerting their full weight downward on the still submerged casks below them in the holds, so that we should have to lift them as a dead weight if we ever lifted the *Spahi* even an inch off the bottom. And there wasn't possibly enough extra buoyancy obtainable in the upper part of the *Spahi* to lift that extra load. So, of course, she wouldn't lift at all, patch or no patch—unless first we stevedored with divers all the casks in the upper third of the holds out of the ship before we pumped any air at all into her.

Ankers' face fell at that. He saw it, all right. But it was a tough jolt. For it meant a terrific amount of diving labor on the bottom of the sea, jockeying those huge hogsheads sideways out of the ship's holds to the cargo hatches in her vertical deck, then sending them up to the surface. All that on top of the herculean task he had already in making the patch. It was enough to make anybody sick.

"How many of those hogsheads d'ye figure there'll be, Captain?" he asked soberly.

"Somewhere between five hundred and a thousand, I think. It depends on how big they are. We can tell better after we get a few

of 'em up and measure them," I answered. "I'm damned sorry, but there's no other way out."

Lieutenant Ankers heaved a deep sigh. He was as big as a couple of horses and could stand a lot, but this on top of all else he'd gone through on the *Spahi* was almost too much. But he took it like a Trojan, though I could see him trying mentally to visualize what a thousand hogsheads might be like.

"Aye, aye, Captain; I'll start on it right away. Anything else?"

"No, Ankers; that's all for now."

Ankers left.

The rest of us—Reed, Williams, Harding, Reitzel, and I—started the second conference on the Grand Dock. We were joined in that by Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard, who had had no part in the *Spahi* discussion.

I introduced him to Reed and to Williams, informed him that Captain Reed would act as Salvage Master for the Grand Dock operation; he and his men would serve under Reed. Reed, I assured him, was practically a superman when it came to raising dry docks. Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard could consider himself most fortunate; not every young man coming up in salvage was blessed with such a mentor. And Reed would carefully observe all the amenities so as not to undermine either Perrin-Trichard's prestige or his authority with his own force—no orders would be given to any of them by Reed save through Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard who could pass them on as his own. I hardly felt called on to mention that this last situation was inescapable—Bill Reed knew no more French than I did and if he didn't give his orders through Perrin-Trichard, he couldn't give any at all to the French seamen, none of whom spoke any English.

Bill Reed, more than old enough to be Perrin-Trichard's father, beamed paternally on him as they shook hands. Perrin-Trichard gazed respectfully into Reed's bronzed face; the French have apparently far more reverence for their elders than we. I felt the two of them would get along fine; as a matter of fact, they always did.

The discussion on the Grand Dock started. I had one general blueprint of the dock already; Perrin-Trichard had brought more with him, showing it in all its details. We fell to studying the blue-

prints, with Perrin-Trichard translating the French notes on them for us, when necessary.

The plan for raising the dry dock was worked out—it would be done with compressed air, as we had raised the Massawa docks. But this was a vast dock, with over fifty separate compartments to be made airtight for blowing. Aside from the holes to be patched and the innumerable other openings to be sealed off, miles of air hose would be required, whole skyfuls of air, and more portable air compressors to provide it than North Africa had ever contained, even before the Nazis had looted it. As for hose, we were fortunate; Captain Harding volunteered the information he had considerable amongst the salvage stores in his hold. But where we were to get enough air compressors, I couldn't imagine—those Reitzel had procured for the *Spahi* would be only a drop in the bucket on the Grand Dock. But I felt the Lord would provide when the time came—He always had in Massawa.

Perrin-Trichard broke timidly in. He had moved all his men from *la Bretagne* at Mers-el-Kebir to the Grand Dock. He had them now working from open boats with hand pumps surveying the Grand Dock; they would do their best for M'sieu Reed, but, please, could I get them only a few decent diving dresses? Theirs were so worn he felt like an assassin when he asked one of his men to go down in the mass of patches that with them passed for a diving dress.

I had to agree with him. I had seen the dilapidated French dresses; I wouldn't want to dive in one of them myself. So I told Reed he would have to give Perrin-Trichard two of the dresses he had brought from Massawa; I would get him a replacement for one from Ankers—after that, his crew and Ankers' crew would each have to go short a diving dress apiece, but we would share with our new French shipmates, and not ask them to work under conditions more dangerous than we faced ourselves. Reed ungrudgingly agreed.

There wasn't much more. Reed needed a power boat and something to dive from. Reitzel undertook to provide them. As for a diving air compressor, Reed felt surely that by tomorrow, his would arrive from Yum Dum, but I cherished no such illusion. I told

Reitzel to see that the scow he hired was big enough to float one of the larger compressors we wouldn't be needing on the *Spahi* for a couple of weeks yet. Reed could use that oversized unit for the present, and every time he broke his back cranking it up to start it, probably curse himself for his overtrustfulness in air force colonels.

So with that the second conference broke up. Reed and Williams left to go to their new quarters with Perrin-Trichard and give him the promised diving dresses; Reitzel started out to find a suitable boat and scow for Reed; and Harding and I went out to see how Ankers was getting along with his new problem.

On the float, Ankers explained to us he had temporarily suspended work on the patch to use his two best men on the first hogshead; after they had worked out the method, he trusted his second string divers could do the underwater stevedoring while the best men went back on the patch again. That way he hoped the overall task wouldn't be stretched out any. Gatchell and Lynch were at the moment both overboard, dangling in their cumbersome diving rigs alongside the vertical deck in front of the fore hold hatch, trying with crowbars to work a hogshead sideways out the hatch. Ankers had the earphones on Gatchell's line over his own head; Ensign Leo Brown, near by, was listening in similarly on Lynch.

I reflected. In the nearly twenty years since I had started salvage work, I had had divers doing almost everything conceivable under water from acting as plumbers to acting as undertakers. But I could not remember that I had ever before had any acting as the brewer's big horses in hauling about hogsheads of hootch. Then another thought struck me.

"Say, Ankers, when Red and George between them get that cask of wine clear of the cargo hatch and out into the open, what's it going to do? Will it sink on them, or will it float up?"

Ankers, swift to see the implications, paused before he answered. If it floated, all well and good; but if it sank, it meant that the divers would have to sling each cask below before it came free, and we would have to rig some sort of a derrick off something to hoist the cask to the surface. We couldn't leave a thousand hogsheads cluttering up the ocean floor alongside the *Spahi*; they'd interfere

with our work. And if we had to sling and hoist them, a job, bad already, would immediately get far worse. Ankers' brow wrinkled up as he thought it over.

"Well Captain, it ought to float. Those hogsheads are full of wine, and wine's partly alcohol, and alcohol's lighter than water. So it ought to float up; and it damned well better had, too, or we're in for a hell of a lot more work."

"Your logic's all right, Ankers; but that's not the whole story. Maybe it won't float. You've covered the wine, but how about the hogsheads themselves? They're probably made of oak staves, and oak is heavier than water, and besides those casks must have steel hoops round 'em, and those hoops are plenty heavier than water. The hogshead by itself'll probably 'sink. Now whether there's enough extra buoyancy in that wine to compensate for the excess weight of the hogshead or not is a question. There's no certainty about it. This damned salvage business is getting just too complicated for comfort any more. But I guess we'll know the answer before long. Let's all pray she floats!"

So while Gatchell and Lynch cursed and pried and tugged in the submerged wreck below us, trying to work free a hogshead from a ship in such a position that any self-respecting stevedore would have thrown up the job in disgust and gone home immediately unless he got higher wages, shorter hours, and double-time for dirty work, plus a few other fringe concessions, their shipmates on the float above started to scratch their heads trying to figure out what that hogshead was actually going to do when it was finally shoved clear of the hatch coamings.

At last came word from below. Over Red's diving phone came the message to Ankers,

"Stand by on the topside for that barrel! One more shove down here and she's all clear!"

I laughed. Red's faith that it would float was refreshing. Apparently he'd been too busy below to concern himself over the relative buoyancies in sea water of wine, oak, and steel, and their various possible combinations in that actual hogshead. But in a moment now, we'd know.

It floated. I almost cheered.

But it didn't float by much. With barely a ripple to mark its rising, that hogshead came to rest on the surface with nothing more of it rising above water than might easily be mistaken for an oversized flapjack which somebody had heaved overboard. In a huge hogshead weighing all told around half a ton, there wasn't over five pounds positive buoyancy keeping it afloat. Had the water in Oran harbor been a little less brackish and more like fresh water, it would certainly have sunk.

"O.K., Red!" sang out the exuberant Ankers to his diver below. "She's up! Can you get out any more this dive?"

"A couple more, maybe," phoned up Gatchell. "The next one oughta come easier!"

So it proved. The hogsheads in that hold were like a bottle of olives; once the first one was out, the others did come easier. When Ankers finally called time on his divers, they had sent up five casks all told. Ankers sent out his workboat, towed the five hogsheads to the quay, and there the *King Salvor* took hold of them with her boom and landed them, each on end, on the stone coping opposite her forecastle.

Once out of water, those hogsheads proved huge. They must each have held over three ordinary barrels; 140 gallons of wine apiece at least.

Shortly Ankers and his men all knocked off for the day and came ashore for supper. Ankers told me that next day, Gatchell and Lynch would go back on the patch. From what they had learned about manhandling those casks out, any ordinary diver should have no great trouble thereafter in carrying through the cargo unloading.

But when I came back in the morning to watch the progress on the patch before going out on the Grand Dock, I found a very disgruntled salvage officer waiting for me on the quay. There were no divers out on the float, there weren't any on the quay waiting to go out to the *Spahi*.

"Sorry, Captain," apologized Ankers, "but there'll be no diving today. I was just a plain damned fool to have left those hogsheads on the quay last night. Somebody broached one of 'em in the dark, and this morning everybody's so dead drunk in his bunk I don't

dare trust a man of 'em overboard. Harding's crew on the *King Salvor's* in about the same shape, only they don't have to dive. Those casks hold too damned much for safety. But it's mighty fine wine, even if it has been submerged over a month. Try some, Captain," and he offered me a flask he'd himself filled with it.

I tipped up the flask. It *was* good wine; excellent, I thought. The Algerian vineyards were certainly turning out a good product. Somehow I couldn't blame the men, with five unguarded casks of it right under their noses. After all, even the Bible says something about not muzzling the ox that treadeth out the corn; still, I wished that they had gone a little more lightly on their guzzling of the grapes that they had trodden out from beneath the sea.

"O.K., Ankers, you're right about it," I agreed, giving him back the flask. "It's good."

"That's what the boys must've thought," continued Ankers, "for one of those casks is about empty. How my gang ever managed that, I can't figure, for even taking in the *King Salvor's* whole crew, that's over two gallons a man. I just can't make out how they held it all."

"They probably didn't," I muttered. "After all, they may have friends around here, or they've laid some away for a rainy day, or maybe both things happened. You'd better search that salvage shack, or you'll never get any more work done. That *Spahi* is going to be the ruination of us; I certainly wished she'd been loaded with olive oil! This can't go on or we'll all be shot yet for sabotaging our own job. You have Reitzel make arrangements with General Larkin" (Larkin had succeeded Fredendall in the Army command in Oran) "to send down an army quartermaster and a squad of G.I.s with rifles and bayonets to tally in and take charge of what's left here in those five casks, and of all the rest of that lot from now on as we bring it ashore. After that, if we get the whole United States Army drunk on the *Spahi's* cargo, it'll be Larkin's funeral, not ours. But I'm going to be damned sure my salvage outfit stays sober enough hereafter, so we can work."

C H A P T E R

18

SEEING THERE WOULD BE NOTHING

on the *Spahi* that day, I went out at once with Reed's gang to get them going on the Grand Dock. Reed's men, being all quartered up on the heights in Oran itself, far from the quay and the salvage shack, had been no parties to the orgy of the night before. They were all quite fit for work; a fact they deeply regretted as they enviously inhaled the rich breath of the snoring sleepers in the salvage shack just before we all shoved off.

Reitzel had procured a small but broad-beamed and decked-over French scow which made a good working platform, and a power boat to tend it. Harding had lowered on to its after deck one of the rented compressors, an Ingersoll-Rand of 110 cubic foot capacity, bearing a French nameplate. The compressor seemed to be in fair shape, so whether it was actually French-built or merely an American machine with a French label, we didn't care. I had sufficient faith in Ingersoll-Rand to believe that whatever they turned out, even in France, would be reliable enough to risk men's lives on in diving. Its only drawback was that it was too big for the job, and even on that barge took up too much of the available working space.

Once over the port side of the Grand Dock with the scow, we picked out a spot a little beyond the submerged deckhouse with its flagstaff, and Bill Reed, who was a very practical seaman, managed to drop a weighted line with a running bowline in its end, down over a submerged stanchion on the dock below so we could anchor ourselves to it while we worked.

I elected to make the first dive on the dock myself. I felt some

first hand information on diving conditions in Oran, as well as on the Grand Dock, would be helpful to me in sizing up what to expect. So I peeled off my army O.D.s, dragged on another suit of heavy wool underwear over the one I was already wearing, pulled on another pair of wool socks, and I was ready to be dressed.

Buck and Al served as valets. They dropped me expertly into a stiff canvas-covered rubber-lined diving dress, and after soaping my wrists, worked them one by one through the tightly fitting rubber cuffs and snapped on the sealing wristlets. Then they slid the heavy bronze breastplate over my head onto my shoulders and turned to, both of them, on bolting the top of the dress watertight to it. That done, they went to work harnessing me into a lead belt while Ervin Johnson slid my feet, one after the other, into the heavy lead-soled diving boots and proceeded to lace them and my trouser-legs up with sections of signal halyard for lacings.

The rest went quickly. Jim Buzbee, a wizard with such things, managed to crank up and start the French air compressor without too many curses at it. The air hose was coupled to my helmet, the earphones put over my head and jacked into the helmet receptacle, the helmet tested out and dropped down over my head. Then with Buck gripping my shoulders to brace the breastplate, Al gave the helmet a sharp twist to lock it into place, and I was all ready. Completely cased in, I turned on the air valve a trifle to get something to breathe, and immediately my suit swelled out like a balloon.

Buck and Al took me by both shoulders to hold me up, for I was now draped with over 200 pounds of lead and copper, and dragged me to the gunwale, to which a short ladder had been secured leading a few feet down into the water. Laboriously they hoisted me and all my weights over the gunwale and onto the ladder. Clumsily I started down it till, on the last step, I was wholly immersed beneath the surface and stopped a moment to test out everything before dropping down the descending line dangling in the water from the barge.

No longer was my canvas suit ballooning out. Now the sea about me was pressing it hard against my body, lovingly embracing every last square inch of me in the kind of over all hug one may dream of but which no woman, however affectionate, is quite capable of

matching. That embrace was a little too complete; I could hardly breathe from the pressure on my chest. I opened my air valve a trifle more, screwed down a bit on the exhaust valve on the back of my helmet from which my air was gurgling out and upward through the water. In a moment the slightly added air pressure started to swell my suit out over my lungs so breathing became freer. With that adjustment I could work, though from my waist down, my suit was still as tightly pressed in on me as before. I wound my legs about the descending line, gripped it with one hand, and with the other signaled to Bill Reed, who was tending me, to lower away.

My lifeline slacked off above. With the surface undulating over my head like a silvery sheet, I started to drop through the water. The light, never very good in winter in northern waters, started to fade perceptibly, the water pressure began to increase as I went deeper. A few fathoms down, and I signaled for a stop. There in the water before me loomed up vertically the massive steel wall of the port side of the Grand Dock, stretching away several fathoms in both directions from me and there seeming to dissolve imperceptibly into the sea. What I could see of it was only a blank precipice, topped a little above my helmet by a steel railing, and broken a little below my feet by a narrow platform protruding horizontally from the sheer side, a working platform, no doubt, for sailors while docking ships. Since everything seemed to match the blueprints and there was no damage visible in that vicinity, I signaled to be lowered again.

This time, I made no further stop till I hit bottom. Down the line I slid, watching through my faceplates the steel wall in front of me continuously dissolving in the water over my head and continuously materializing seemingly out of nothing below my feet as I dropped. All the while, the light from above grew steadily dimmer and dimmer. My lead-soled boots touched something, I stopped dropping. Barely visible under my feet, I could see the steel floor of the Grand Dock.

“On the bottom!” I sang out to Reed above. “Give me some more slack!” Immediately my lines eased off, leaving me free for movement. At my feet was the heavy lead weight holding the lower end

of the descending line. I looked carefully round to mark its location, then upward to see my lifeline and air hose weren't fouled round it. Up that line I must finally rise again. It was about one fathom inboard of the vertical port inside wall of the dock, but there was nothing else within sight to identify the spot more particularly. I would have to count my steps in every direction as I went from it, so I could retrace my path later.

I looked around. I was on the deck of the dock in about ten fathoms of water, not bad for diving work, except that the illumination for seeing what one was about was poor. The visibility, I judged, was perhaps three or four fathoms. Of course I couldn't see the far starboard side of the dock, over a hundred feet away through the water, nor even the line of center keel blocks, only half that far from me. Carefully I turned myself till my back was squarely set to the port wall of the dock behind me, to give me my direction, then started cautiously to breast my way through the water toward the line of invisible keel blocks halfway across the dock.

The water, I thanked my stars, was cold. Diving around Oran was not going to be the torture to the men that it had been in the Red Sea, the hottest and saltiest body of water on earth. In the Red Sea, between the hot water he was immersed in and the hot and humid air pumped down to him, a diver might preferably have been in a Turkish bath. If he went down stripped naked to try to keep a little cool, the coarse inside layer of the diving dress sandpapered his perspiring skin off in large patches, which promptly became terribly infected. Paradoxical as it may seem, we always dived on the wrecks in the Red Sea clad in full suits of heavy woolen underwear and woolen socks, to avoid being flayed alive by our own diving dresses; and as a consequence, we nearly drowned instead in our own sweat inside them. But here in Oran, at least a man could dive in comfort, with only the normal diving dangers, plentiful enough, to battle.

A formless shadow, breast high, loomed up ahead in the semi-twilight. A few more steps and I was up against the long fore and aft row of heavy oaken blocks, set one on another to a height of about four feet, which formed the center line of keel blocks on

which a ship was docked. They were too close together to pass between. Inflating my suit with a little more air to give me greater buoyancy, I half-climbed, half-floated myself to the top of that barrier, and then after making myself again sufficiently heavy for safety, started to plod aft through the water, using that row of keel blocks as an elevated walkway and counting my steps as I went. The massive oak blocks were all in place—none had floated up, none had been knocked over in the scuttling of the dock.

Satisfied of that at last after going some distance, and seeing no signs of other damage to the near by dock floor on either side, I retraced my steps, counting as before to come back to the starting point of my walk down the blocks. Then down I slid to the dock floor and started to push my way through the sea to port for the far dock side wall which I couldn't see through the water. But, of course, I knew that I'd ultimately bump into it if I didn't lose my sense of direction and start traveling in aimless circles on the ocean floor.

I found I'd been fairly accurate; when I ended with that steel wall again in front of me, I wasn't a fathom away from the descending line.

I could have spent some hours traveling over the floor of that huge dock at the slow pace at which a diver must go, without covering all of it, but there was no object in trying. I'd seen enough to appreciate conditions and to understand what the men might be talking about as they worked below. I seized the descending line, signaled to be hauled up.

Reed, who had been taking in the slack of my long lines as I came back, promptly answered the signal. My lifeline immediately came taut; in another moment I was heaved off the dock floor and was on my way up through the sea.

Not having been down under pressure at ten fathoms any great length of time, I required only slight decompression on my way up. At about four fathoms depth, the heaving up stopped and I was left dangling on the end of my lifeline for five minutes to allow what air might have dissolved under pressure in my blood to work itself out without forming dangerous bubbles to give me "the bends." During that period, willy-nilly, I could do nothing but study the

upper part of the steel side wall of the dry dock, near which I hung.

I noted 'almost in front of my faceplate a round opening in the vertical dock wall, perhaps eight inches in diameter. That, I reflected, would be the outlet of the air vent pipe to the dock compartment far below, to allow air to escape from it while that compartment was being flooded in normal docking operation. We should have to plug that opening solidly, together with many more like it, if we ever hoped to keep compressed air in the dock to lift it. I kicked myself forward through the water close enough to push a hand into that hole and feel around inside it to see what was what. The results were discouraging. There was a sharply curved steel gooseneck fitted to the inside of that opening. It made such a quick turn inside that it was dubious that the wood plugs I had already had turned out for the job would drive in far enough to stop up the holes and ever really seal them off airtight. I sighed. Probably we should have to plug them all, fifty of them, by pouring in cement—a damned nuisance to run in under water to start with, and even more of a nuisance to get out of the pipes once it had hardened and after the dock was lifted so we could operate the dock again. But there was no help for it. More work for my meager crew.

A jerk on my lifeline. My brief decompression time was over, they were ready above to haul me to the surface. I signaled back, then once again I started to rise with the light swiftly increasing about me. In another minute I could see the barnacled bottom of the diving scow floating over my head; right above my helmet was the ladder. I seized a rung, started to climb it, no great effort so long as I was still wholly submerged. In a moment, my helmet popped through the surface, then my shoulders. As I emerged, no longer water-borne, down on my shoulders again came the full weight of that 200 pounds of lead and copper draping me and I was helpless to lift myself further; while instantly, no longer held in by the counterbalancing water pressure, my suit billowed out about me as if ready to burst. Hastily I clamped down on my air valve and slacked off on my exhaust valve to avoid that. Simultaneously from above Buck and Al seized me by both shoulders, passed a safety line under my arms and about my chest to prevent

losing me and letting me drown in case I slipped from their grip during the next operation, and then removed my helmet. With that off, and free to breathe in the open air again, they let me rest a moment longer on the ladder before once again grabbing me by my breastplate and heaving me up bodily onto the deck of the scow to be finally undressed.

A few minutes later, freed of the diving armor and clothed again in my army O.D.s, I went over with Bill Reed and Lloyd Williams, what they were to do. Buck Scougale, who was to dive next, and Al Watson after him, might as well start driving into the air vents below those huge tapered wood plugs we had made. If they went solidly enough in before the goosenecks stopped them, they would probably serve. Otherwise, we might as well give up the plugs and go to cementing up the holes instead. We would soon know.

With that, while Buck was being dressed, I left them on the scow and went ashore. Next morning I should know whether we were in for a big cementing job on the Grand Dock as well as on the *Spahi*.

HOWEVER, NEXT MORNING, DECEMBER 21, I did not find out. Having some office work to do first in my hotel room, I didn't come down to the quay till mid-morning, to find then that Reed's crew were already across the harbor in diving position over the Grand Dock. Since the *Spahi* diving float was closer, I decided to go out on that first to watch Ankers' now sobered up crew resume operations on their preparations for their cementing job, a real cement filling for a Gargantuan cavity all in one piece.

Hardly had I landed on their float, though, than from across the water I heard shouts from the *King Salvor*'s bridge, and turning to see what might be the trouble there, I saw a considerable commotion and semaphore flags starting to wave. I didn't wait for the signal to come through; instead I leaped back into the small boat I had just come out in and shoved off for the *King Salvor*, less than a quarter of a mile off alongside the quay. In a few minutes we were under her rail. Captain Harding leaned down from his bridge to tell me the telephone in the salvage shack (the only one near by) had started ringing wildly with an urgent call for me.

I clambered from the small boat to his deck, crossed it to the quay, then ran for the shack, about a hundred feet away, to pick up the telephone receiver. The American Port Captain was on the other end.

"Ellsberg," he started off instantly I had answered, "we've just got a message a big British troopship, *Strathallan*, with about 6000 aboard, mostly American troops for Algiers, was torpedoed in convoy early this morning sixty miles due north of here. She's hit in

her engine room, port side. She's reported sinking. The British are sending out about half a dozen destroyers from Mers-el-Kebir, all they've got there, to try and take off the troops. Get going!"

"Aye, aye, Captain! We'll be underway with the *King Salvor* in no time at all!" I sang out, banging the receiver back on its hook as I dashed towards my salvage ship.

Harding on the *King Salvor*, suspecting some such message, already had his whole crew at quarters and was busy singling his mooring hawsers. He looked inquiringly down from his bridge at me as I hurdled his gunwale on the run from the quay.

"O.K., Captain! Cast off, four bells!" I shouted up to him.

Harding needed nothing more. Overboard went the heavy towing hawsers he had out to the *Spahi*, then the remaining mooring lines, save one only on his port quarter to hang to as he worked himself clear of the quay. Bells started to clang in his engine room, the water foamed violently up under his stern, already he was backing on his last hawser to swing himself clear. In hardly a minute more, the last line was tossed free and the *King Salvor* was underway, steaming on one boiler with thick black smoke pouring from her stack as the engineers below opened wide all their burners to shoot heavy jets of oil into the fires, bringing their other boiler as swiftly as possible up to full power. By that time, after helping on the hawsers, I was up on the bridge myself.

For a few minutes more, not a word was spoken. Harding, a very phlegmatic Englishman, was too busy swinging in a half circle to starboard, first dodging the wrecks of the *Hartland* and of the *Boudjmel*, then making sure he was pointing squarely for the middle of the narrow channel between the *Pigeon* and the *Spahi*, to pay the slightest attention to anything else, however curious he might have been about the whys and wherefores of it all. We swept by close aboard the float over the *Spahi*, rocking it violently. Lieutenant Ankers and his men could have been in no doubt as to what our hurried departure and that heavy cloud of smoke pouring from the little *King Salvor*'s stack meant. As we steamed past, we caught from the men there, unsteadily trying to balance themselves on the heaving float, a ragged chorus,

"Good luck to you!"

I waved back to them. Harding, his eyes glued now on the two buoys marking the tight channel between the wrecks, paid no attention. We passed clear between the buoys, straightened away eastward for the jetties forming the much wider exit from the outer harbor. In a few minutes we were out in the open sea, under the high cliff topped by Ravin Blanc Battery frowning down on us as we swung under its guns, heeling far over in a 90° hard turn toward the north.

Once we had settled on course 0° by gyro compass, Harding turned the deck over to Teddy Brown, First Mate. Then with a last word over the voice tube to Andy Duncan, Chief Engineer, down below, to keep pouring on the oil till the safety valves were ready to pop, he relaxed a bit and looked at last toward me for the explanation.

"Who got it this time, Captain?" he asked.

"The *Strathallan*, British troopship bound for Algiers with about 6000 American G.I.s aboard, 60 miles north of here. She says she's sinking. Know anything about her?" I inquired anxiously, for to me the name *Strathallan* meant nothing. She couldn't ever have run transatlantic, or I'd have known of her.

Harding's shaggy eyebrows lifted instantaneously, an expression of deep pain contorted his face. Evidently that name meant a lot to him.

"The *Strathallan*, eh? What a bloody shame! She's a P. & O. liner, running peacetime to India. Biggest thing they've got. Around 25,000 tons she is. There's not many ships afloat on any ocean bigger'n the *Strathallan*. New, too. Where'd she catch it?"

"In the engine room, port side," I answered. "That's all the information I got before we shoved off, except she reports herself sinking. Sounds to me just like the *Porcupine* torpedo job—same side, same spot, and to hell with any destroyers convoying her—exactly the same attack tactics. It's got all the earmarks of that same U-boat captain. He's sure good, but I'd like to strangle him! He's too damned good for our good!"

Harding nodded glumly in agreement, then another thought struck him and he looked mournfully at me.

"Six thousand troops aboard, you said? She'll never have boats

for anything like that number; maybe not even rafts enough for a lot of 'em; and the water's too cold for a man in a life preserver for very long. How about those troops? Even if we pile 'em six deep, we can never start to get half that many aboard the *King Salvador*! A hell of a lot of men are going to drown!"

"Don't worry yourself over that one, anyway, Harding," I assured him. "There was one more bit I heard I forgot to tell you. Your Vice Admiral Syfret is sending all the destroyers he has in Mers-el-Kebir out to take off the troops. They ought all to be along soon," I finished, looking aft toward the coastline astern of us and a little to port towards Mers-el-Kebir.

They were. Already I could see plumes of smoke and steam emerging from Mers-el-Kebir harbor. It was taking the destroyers longer to get underway and to get clear of the intricate series of defensive booms and nets shielding Mers-el-Kebir than it had taken us, but after that they swiftly made up the difference. At twelve knots now, all she could do on both boilers, the stubby *King Salvador* with a bone in her teeth was pushing northward through moderate head seas. But in twenty minutes, British destroyers began to stream by us, full out with forced draft blowers roaring, all making over thirty-six knots, shooting past us so fast it seemed the poor *King Salvador*, left rocking violently in their tremendous wakes, must be anchored. One after another they streaked by through the water, a magnificent sight to watch. There were five of them, all in an extreme hurry.

The destroyers were in no formation at all, simply strung out helter-skelter at whatever intervals they had cleared Mers-el-Kebir; after that apparently it was every destroyer for herself in the race to get to the *Strathallan* and take off her troops before she sank. In fifteen minutes more the last of those five destroyers was hull down on the horizon ahead of us, making knots north.

Like a plow horse trying to keep up with Kentucky thoroughbreds, we plodded along in their wakes at twelve knots, seemingly an even slower speed now than it had appeared shortly before those hurtling destroyers had shot by us, going like projectiles themselves. But it was every last fraction of a knot that Andy Duncan, with his safety valves occasionally popping off, could get out of

the *King Salvador*, and with that I had to be satisfied. She was doing her best.

I began to do a little mental figuring. It would take the destroyers about an hour and a half from the time they passed us to get to the *Strathallan*; I prayed earnestly that they might be in time. I could not recall any troopship with that many men aboard ever having been torpedoed before. And in World War I, the losses off troopships torpedoed while carrying far less men had been sickening.

As for ourselves on the *King Salvador*, if the *Strathallan* stayed afloat that long, it would take us about four hours yet to get to her. Assuming she did stay afloat, she would probably be badly water-logged by then and in a very precarious position, requiring instant attention and all the aid we could give her crew to help save her. I told Harding to turn to with his deck force, breaking out of the holds all his portable salvage pumps, his suction hoses, his discharge hoses. Everything was to be rigged for immediate action with all his booms cleared, ready to swing aboard and start pumping out the *Strathallan* the instant we laid alongside her—assuming there still remained above water any *Strathallan* to lay alongside of.

It was about noon. Cutting short the meal hour, Harding and his Third Mate, Sid Everett, with all the men they had on deck, fell eagerly on the task. The wide deck hatches were undogged, swung back. To the creaking of the steam winches, a stream of heavy salvage pumps started up and out of the holds with the swaying pumps and their gasoline engines dangling from the booms, carefully guided lest as the ship rolled they smash themselves on the hatch coamings or smash some unwary seaman acting as a buffer for them, into jelly. After the pumps came the massive lengths of discharge hose and the even more massive lengths of reinforced suction hose, to be landed in ever-increasing heaps on the *King Salvador*'s decks till there was no longer room to put a foot down anywhere without clambering on salvage gear.

In a little under three hours, it was all out of the holds; every gasoline-driven salvage pump had been started up and tested to make sure it would start again when wanted; the ponderous suction and discharge hoses had been coupled up into as long sec-

tions as we could possibly mule-haul about the decks of a wreck.

The *King Savior*'s salvage pumps were all readied for action—it would be a big pumping out job that that outfit of portable pumps couldn't handle. If there was enough of the *Strathallan* still left above water to set all those pumps on when we reached her, with the aid of the whole crew of that torpedoed ship in handling the pumps, we'd save her.

The little knot of panting British seamen who had been working like fiends breaking out the holds, now got a few minutes rest while the *King Savior*, shaking furiously all over from the excessive load on her propeller, pounded along northward at her best gait. The wornout sailors flung themselves down on the mountains of heavy rubber hose to ease their aching muscles, the while they (and all those on the bridge) speculated on what was happening ahead of us, in which situation we were now all ready to take a hand.

Very shortly we spotted light smoke on the horizon a little on our port bow. In a few minutes more, that smoke had materialized into two destroyers, one close astern the other, headed shoreward at full power. They would pass us abeam some miles off to port.

Through binoculars I scanned them as they drew abeam. They were too far off to make out much detail through the glasses, but their decks seemed to be crowded with men. Apparently they had taken everything aboard they could hold and were now rushing in to unload, possibly to come out again for more. But their distance from us disturbed me; perhaps we were steering the wrong course for quickest contact. I asked Harding to signal the second destroyer,

"Where is *Strathallan* and what is her condition?"

A signalman flashed that out on an Aldis lamp pointed at the second destroyer's bridge, now broad off our beam. By the time the message had gone through, that scurrying tin can was well back on our port quarter. By the time the message had been given her skipper and he had written out his answer and given it to his signalman to flash back to us, what with our twelve knots in one direction and his thirty-six in the opposite one, he was so far away astern I doubted we'd be able to get any of his reply. Our signalman did manage to catch the first two words,

"DEAD ASTERN—"

But whatever else was sent, we never got. I had to rest content with that.

"Dead astern," eh? Presumably of him, since he was coming from her. We then must be heading too much to starboard. After a little figuring on his chart, Harding changed course about half a point westward to port, to settle on 354° instead of due north.

At about 3 P.M., we sighted more light smoke, this time almost dead ahead. Apparently our change in direction had put us on the true course. In a few minutes we made out the sharp bows of three more destroyers, each wreathed in spray, coming our way. These, without question, were going to pass us close aboard, also to port. I gave Harding another signal to send, asking him to aim it at the last destroyer as soon as he could make out her bridge, so that we might have the longest possible interval for communication. And this time, for brevity, I cut my message in two. I was no longer interested in the *Strathallan's* position; I felt I knew that well enough for our purposes.

As soon as the bow of the third destroyer was sufficiently clear of the two leading her to allow a sight of her bridge, our signal lantern started to flash out,

"What is *Strathallan's* condition?"

We got an answering flash in acknowledgment. As it would take a minute or two for the answer to be prepared, I turned my attention momentarily to the two leading destroyers, now rapidly bearing down on us.

One so close astern the other as to be running in its foaming wake, both hardly two hundred yards off so that no glasses were needed, those two destroyers flashed past us. I gazed, open-mouthed in astonishment—never had I imagined anything like those two tin cans. No longer did they look like dun-colored warships or like warships of any color. From their gunwales up, they seemed to have been repainted, standing vividly out in unbroken olive drab, in startling contrast to their war-colored lower hulls. From stem to stern on each of them nothing met the eye save an unbroken mass of khaki. They were packed so solidly with soldiers all over every

inch of their topsides that nothing else was visible—no superstructures, no guns, no torpedo tubes, no racks of depth charges—everything had wholly disappeared beneath those avalanches of khaki from the *Strathallan* that had flowed aboard to engulf both ships!

No wonder that although inward bound they were making top speed—speed was their only protection now, for otherwise they were totally helpless. They couldn't fire a gun, launch a torpedo, or drop a depth charge in their own defense, even should a U-boat surface close enough aboard them to hit it with a biscuit! Nobody could possibly lift even an arm on those overcrowded decks to throw the biscuit. There must have been far more than a thousand men jamming the decks and superstructures of each of those lean warships. I wondered the soldiers on them could even breathe, so tightly were they packed together.

In another instant, almost before my sagging jaw could close, the two leading destroyers had swept by and were dropping astern. Still dazed by that spectacle, but thankful that our troops had obviously been saved, I looked forward toward the third destroyer. Her signal lamp, trained on us, was beginning to flash. Before the message was completed, she also, as solid with troops as her two sisters, had shot past us and was well astern. Our signalman spelled out the answer as it came in, while the quartermaster copied it down:

“STRATHALLAN HEAVILY ON FIRE AND COMPLETELY ABANDONED BY CREW AS TOTAL LOSS. ALL TROOPS OFF.”

My insides seemed progressively to be turning to lead as I stared at the message, forming letter by letter, as the quartermaster jotted it down.

Heavily on fire—completely abandoned by crew—total loss—! By the time the quartermaster got to that, paralysis was complete. With my stomach tied in a hard knot, I could hardly read the rest of it. I sagged at the knees, gripped the near by engine telegraph to support myself.

Why in God's name hadn't the *Strathallan* sent in correct information about her condition before we started, so we might have come out decently prepared for what faced us? Why no mention of

the fire? We had been rushed out to sea prepared to help a sinking ship and here instead was one wholly abandoned because she was on fire! Those low pressure salvage pumps littering our decks were totally useless to cope with fire. What was going to be urgently needed was high pressure fire pumps and several hundred men at least to fight that fire. While the *King Salvor* had some fire pumps also, she had not over fifty men in her entire ship's complement.

So it came as the final crushing blow that the *Strathallan's* own officers and crew, which must have comprised 600 men at the very minimum, instead of waiting for the help that was on the way, had all ingloriously abandoned their ship to the flames as soon as the troops were off. Lost probably in that flood of khaki I had just seen, they must at that moment be on those five destroyers on their way ashore! There would be nobody at all on the huge *Strathallan* to help the pitiful little handful of men on the *King Salvor* in their fight for her!

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20

WITH THE SOUTHBOUND TROOP-laden destroyers rapidly shrinking into insignificant specks on the sea astern to leave us wholly alone in the middle of the heaving ocean, the *King Salvor* plodded on northward. When my intestines had unknotted themselves sufficiently to let me think again in some fashion, I turned to Harding on the bridge alongside me, dully ordered,

"Well, skipper, you might as well start your crew striking down into the holds again those salvage pumps and hoses they just finished hoisting out. We'll have to clear your decks for other things. Leave a couple of the smaller pumps and a little hose for 'em on the topside for emergencies; all the rest'll have to go below again. Then start breaking out instead all the fire hose you've got on the ship and we'll begin coupling it up into long lengths, say about 500 feet in each length to start with. How're you fixed for fire pumps? She's completely dead. There'll be no pumps going at all on her to give us water. Got any gasoline-driven portables we can lift aboard 'er?"

Harding shook his head wearily.

"No, nothing but what's part o' the ship; only our own steam-driven high pressure fire pumps down in the engine room. But we're well enough fixed that way; the *King Salvor*'s got steam pumping capacity to feed a dozen fire hose lines all at once and some to spare. And I've got plenty of fire hose to run aboard 'er, too. It's none o' that I'm thinking of, Captain. It's only where's a' the men a' coming from now to fight this fire with?"

Harding looked at me; I looked at Harding. I knew as well as

he that his question was purely rhetorical. Both of us knew perfectly well that all the men that were going to fight that troopship fire, from which over a dozen times our number had already fled, were coming off the *King Salvador* because there just wasn't any other place now they could come from. Including his black gang and all his officers, he had just fifty men aboard; fifty-one, including myself. Some men, of course, would have to be left aboard the *King Salvador* to fire the boilers and keep her pumps and machinery going, while the rest of us boarded the abandoned *Strathallan* to fight the fire. Possibly we could throw thirty men aboard the wreck—thirty men to fight a conflagration on a 25,000 ton ship reported heavily on fire and abandoned because of it.

I didn't even bother to answer Harding's question, and Harding who expected no answer, didn't even wait for one. He turned to call down on deck to Sid Everett, his Third Mate, who, like all his seamen already worn out from handling cargo, was sprawled out with them on the heaps of suction hoses, all trying to catch their breath again. Those men, together with a few engineers, would shortly have to constitute our whole fire-fighting force. What they all desperately needed most right now was a complete rest in preparation for what faced them.

"Sid!" sang out Harding to his mate. "Rouse up all your lads there and turn to with 'em striking below those salvage pumps and the hoses you just broke out! We just learned we got a fire instead of a flood to fight! When you've got the decks cleared, Sid, send up every last length o' fire hose you can find below! Shake a leg, now! It won't be long till we'll all be fighting a big fire on the *Strathallan*!"

Sid Everett, as well as all the sailors who of course had heard the orders from the bridge as clearly as their mate, gaped a moment at the captain; then he dragged himself up to station his men for stowing below the salvage gear—a harder job than breaking it out. But there were no complaints; they were all good salvage men who had learned long since to expect anything—usually, the worst.

But I observed that Harding was a good enough practical psychologist to have suppressed something which would have caused plenty of hard words. He had made no mention to his own men

that after breaking their backs twice handling cargo, they were immediately going to have to wade into that big fire—alone. Each of those dog-tired seamen, as he turned to wearily on sending below the heavy equipment which he had hardly finished sending up, visualized, of course, the hundreds and hundreds of sailors who would naturally comprise the crew of a huge liner like the *Strathallan*, the biggest vessel the Peninsular and Oriental Company had, waiting for us at their ship's rails. They would do all the actual firefighting, expecting of us only to send aboard them extra fire hoses and the high pressure water we should be able to pump through those hoses, of both of which they would obviously enough be short. There was going to be a sad awakening soon, but at the moment Harding wasn't taking any chances on his exhausted men curling up on him over the prospect.

With the little deck force once again on the vibrating *King Salvador*'s topsides busy with the winches and the booms, both Harding and I turned our attention to studying through spyglasses a large cloud on the horizon far ahead which we had casually taken for granted as only a cloud. Now we knew better; it must be a cloud of smoke from the burning *Strathallan*. Harding ordered his helmsman to forget the compass course; he was to steer directly for the windward side of that cloud. The helmsman shifted course about two degrees more to port to bring it dead ahead. I judged that in about an hour, we should be there.

At 4:30 P.M. on December 21, the shortest day of the year, we arrived, having been underway five and a half hours since leaving our berth in Oran. We were ready again. All except two of the salvage pumps and their hoses had been struck below; all the fire hose and the hose nozzles the *King Salvador* owned were coupled up and laid out on deck—over a mile of it, made up in twelve separate runs. The sight of that ominous cloud of smoke ahead, increasing in size, growing plainer and glowing a brighter red every minute as we bore down on it, had acted as a spur to the jaded seamen. In little over an hour, straining as neither threats nor promises of reward could have made them, they had done as much as in the three hours before when there had been nothing visible to any of us save the empty ocean.

We arrived, still having an hour or so of daylight of that brief December day left to us, with a moderate sea running and the wintry wind blowing over a cold gray ocean from the westward, about force 2, not bad.

A weird scene met our eyes.

Lying in the trough of the sea and rolling sluggishly to it, broad-side to the wind and pointing north, was the drifting *Strathallan*, a towering passenger liner, with huge tongues of red and yellow flame leaping fiercely skyward in a long fire front extending from her bridge all the way aft to the end of her passenger superstructure—about two-thirds her whole length. Across the water to us came the roaring and the crackling of the flames while a vast cloud of heavy black smoke rose lazily in the light wind to drift away to leeward, curling in a backdraft down her starboard side, spreading over the sea there, rising again to fill the entire sky to the eastward.

The *Strathallan* had a list to port of about 10° , no very bad list; and she was undoubtedly down a few feet by the stern also, but not much. As we first passed close aboard along her port side (the windward one and consequently clear of all smoke), we could see no sign at all above water in her hull of the hole the torpedo had blasted in her engine room.

Disregarding the fire for a moment, I scanned the hull of the *Strathallan* with a strictly professional eye as the *King Salvador* slowly passed down her port side from her stern toward her bow. The *Strathallan*, hours after her torpedoing, wasn't in the slightest danger of sinking from the damage the torpedo had caused her; she never had been in any such danger. Her captain or whoever had so reported her, must have been a panic-stricken fool. One torpedo, it was true, had practically broken the *Porcupine* in half and put her on her last legs, but there was an immense difference between what one torpedo could do to a 1900 ton tin can like the *Porcupine* and an enormous 25,000 ton liner like the *Strathallan*, one of the dozen largest ships afloat.

"Disregarding the fire for a moment—" But how could anyone, however strictly professional, disregard that raging fire even for a moment? Four hours before, her crew had abandoned her because

of that fire, leaving it since then to spread uncontrolled, and it certainly had. Now the sight of those flames reaching toward high heaven was enough to strike terror to any heart. As my eyes swung back from her waterline to gaze again at her blazing topsides, I caught the full measure of the picture of disaster she presented.

Hanging limply down from her bow into the sea were two heavy manila towing hawsers, cast adrift now, idly rising and falling to the waves sweeping by, fit enough symbols of her utter abandonment. Her high port side from forecastle to poop was almost invisible—it was completely covered with a mass of scramble nets enveloping her as in a web from gunwales down to waterline. Down those nets from the soaring decks above the cataract of troops must have poured in a khaki-colored Niagara to swamp the topsides of the rescuing destroyers as one after another they had run directly alongside the *Strathallan* to take the men off. The *Strathallan* could not possibly have been so badly afire then or this could never have been done.

To add to the forlorn scene, high up on the flame-enveloped boat deck, pointing drunkenly in all directions but mostly skyward, was a row of A.A. guns, and interspersed with them a line of swung-out boat davits from which swayed like long pendulums the fully payed-out boatfalls, slapping their heavy disengaging blocks crazily in and out of the sea below as the heaving *Strathallan* rolled to it. All her lifeboats were gone, every one. Where, I wondered? For neither full nor empty, could I see a single boat drifting about anywhere in the sea. But if the lifeboats were all gone, none of her massive metal liferafts were. They, as well as the lifeboats, had all been shoved overboard, but there were all the liferafts in the water, swinging aimlessly by the dozens at the ends of long painters close aboard the side in tangled masses that must have driven the destroyer captains wild as they maneuvered to lay their thin-shelled vessels alongside without getting themselves sunk.

We came abreast the drifting liner's bow. Harding looked at me inquisitively. What did I wish next?

I told him.

"We'll have to board her, of course, from port, her windward side, and near her stern, Captain. That's our only chance. But be-

fore we try it, swing down her lee side on your way round to her port quarter and let's have a look at her to starboard so we know what's what all around. We'll not have a ghost of a chance to size her up once we're aboard. And as you swing round her bow, Harding, keep well clear of her so's you don't foul your screw in those towing hawsers floating there."

Harding nodded, turned to his helmsman to con the ship around. We stood on a little, turning gradually to starboard, meanwhile keeping a sharp eye on those long hawsers undulating like snakes in the seas till we were clear of their free ends, then swung in a closer circle to starboard to get on her lee side. As we came about to head in the opposite direction, not quite so close to her this time because of the thick masses of smoke flowing down her lee side like flood waters going over a high dam, I got a surprise. I saw we were not alone with the *Strathallan*.

Well to leeward of her in the smoke, sometimes hidden, sometimes clearer, was a large British destroyer, *H.M.S. Laforey*, leader of the destroyer flotilla originally guarding the entire troopship convoy. She had evidently remained behind with the torpedoed *Strathallan* and her troops while all the rest of the troopships and the remaining destroyers with them had continued on toward Algiers. And near the *Laforey* were two armed trawlers, *H.M.S. Restive* and *Active*, which must also have been part of the convoy screen. All three were zigzagging erratically about in the smoke, to make themselves as poor targets as possible. I scanned them through my binoculars.

That they were still there was surprising. It was understandable enough that the *Laforey* and her two smaller consorts (which evidently must have been the vessels once on the far ends of those two adrift towing hawsers) should stand by to protect the *Strathallan* from further attack while the troops were aboard and to try to tow her so long as her crew were trying to save their ship. But once the troops were off and the crew had abandoned her as a total loss and they had cut the towing hawsers adrift, leaving the deserted hulk to burn or to founder or both, why were they further hazarding themselves by remaining where they knew a U-boat was about? But I soon found out.

We had hardly shown up on the same side through the smoke that enveloped them, than the *Laforey*'s signal lantern started to flash on us. That lantern flashed dimly and unevenly, sometimes scarcely visible in the billowing smoke, but in spite of the interferences our signalman managed to catch the signal. He handed me the form:

"FOR PSVO, KING SALVOR. CAN ANYTHING BE DONE?"

I was PSVO. Why the V had even been thrown in except possibly to make a four-letter signal out of my title initials, I never knew. Admiral Cunningham had himself personally chosen them when he had designated me as Principal Salvage Officer; possibly he had tossed in the V for Victory—the British, from Churchill himself on down, were strong on that. At any rate, I was PSVO and the signalman with no hesitation passed me the signal. I looked at it.

I could see now why the *Laforey* was still around. She must have been informed by radio from ashore that we were on our way, and was only waiting for me to write off the *Strathallan* as finished before she and her attendants sought safer waters. But the message made me swear. To ask a salvage man, when he can plainly see the smokestacks of a ship still above water, whether anything can be done, is pure insult. I seized the pencil and his pad of signal blanks from the signalman and dashed off the reply:

**"FROM PSVO TO COMMANDING OFFICER LAFOREY. WE WILL TRY.
PLEASE CONTINUE TO STAND BY."**

I hesitated a moment before giving the reply to the signalman while I eyed again that "PLEASE." Should I send that along with the rest? That Commander, R.N., whoever he might be, who was skipper of the *Laforey* had grossly insulted me and all my men. But then I handed it to the signalman unchanged. This was no time for quibbling over amenities. If I could cajole the skipper of the *Laforey* into staying around (I couldn't order him to) he might save us from a torpedo. After all, there was the sad episode after the Battle of Midway only a few months before, of the little *Hammann* alongside our torpedoed and burning aircraft carrier *York-*

town, valiantly trying to help her big sister extinguish the flames by pumping water to her. In had sneaked a Japanese submarine with more torpedoes, with a single salvo to sink both Good Samaritan and burning victim together in one vast eruption of flame and water. I should prefer to avoid an encore in the Mediterranean. Our signal lantern started to flash back the answer, "PLEASE" and all. I could not afford to deny our U-boat friend somewhere about in the seas beneath us credit for as much tenacity as that Jap in the Pacific.

The *Laforey* flashed acknowledgment, then in a moment flashed us an affirmative. She would continue to stand by to protect us. I forgot the *Laforey*, and turned my attention again to what little could be made out of the *Strathallan*'s lee side. We had completely rounded her bow and were standing down her starboard side, enveloped in hot and choking fumes from burning fuel oil that set us all to coughing violently and our smarting eyes to watering profusely.

We couldn't see much of the *Strathallan*. Her superstructure was completely engulfed in fire and smoke. Occasionally through rifts in the rolling red-tinged clouds tumbling down to leeward, we could make out sections of her precipitous hull, draped as was her port side with scramble nets, festooned with run-out boatfalls, cluttered all along her waterline with badly tangled masses of empty liferafts, more even than there had been on her weather side. But all the time, roughly in way of her smokestacks, we could see even through the thick smoke, patches of her steel shell a little above water glowing a bright red. Her firerooms, with all the fuel oil there now ablaze inside, must be roaring furnaces to heat the hull almost to incandescence.

Shielding our tear-filled eyes as best we could, which wasn't very much, we continued peering through the smoke at the *Strathallan* as the *King Salvor* steamed slowly down her starboard side. I thought I saw something move on one of the liferafts floating close alongside in way of her forward smokestack. I swung up my binoculars, stared intently at the spot. I couldn't be sure—there was too much smoke wreathing everything. I pointed out the raft, asked Harding to look.

Through glasses, both of us carefully scanned the rafts tossing there against the *Strathallan*'s hot side. Neither of us could make out anything definite, but again I thought I saw something slowly and laboriously swinging up from that liferaft. It might be the life-raft painter tautening momentarily, it might be an abandoned life-jacket floating upward in the backdraft—but it might also be an arm. There was no telling.

"Stop her, Harding!" I sang out sharply. "Lower a boat and send it in alongside that raft! We'll see!"

The *King Salvor* stopped, backed her engines briefly to take the headway off her. Down from our starboard davits swiftly dropped our power lifeboat, manned by Teddy Brown, First Mate, and half a dozen seamen, to disappear into the rolling smoke between us and the *Strathallan*.

Finally I caught a vague glimpse of them through my glasses, heaving up and down in the sea for a brief moment alongside that crazy confusion of liferafts against a background of red-hot steel and curling flame, then they were underway again, once more to be swallowed up in the smoke.

In a few minutes our boat was sheering in alongside our lee counter, everybody in it nearly asphyxiated. From the lifeboat, our staggering men were tenderly passing up to their shipmates on the fantail a limp and inert form. They *had* rescued somebody from that raft!

Teddy Brown and his half-dead boat's crew were then dragged aboard themselves, and the lifeboat (which Harding decided he'd leave in the water) secured astern on a short painter. Harding rang up "Slow Ahead," and immediately we were underway again, pushing our way through the smoke. Down on deck, I could see the motionless figure of the man we'd rescued being carried forward to the wardroom, where some seamen would administer first-aid, trying to revive him. (The *King Salvor* had neither surgeon nor sickbay.)

As he was hurried by into our wardroom just below, I looked curiously down from the bridge to see whether that unconscious last survivor, abandoned together with the abandoned *Strathallan*, might be an American G.I. or a British seaman. I got another surprise. Very evidently he was neither—I was looking down into the

limp but swarthy face of a very tall turbaned and tightly-trousered Hindoo!

"How come, skipper?" I asked in bewilderment of Harding who had also momentarily stepped aft on his bridge for a look. "What would a Hindoo like that be doing on a troopship bound from England for this war zone?"

Harding was in no way puzzled.

"It's quite all right, Captain; nothing queer at all about it. He's one of her crew. The *Strathallan*'s a P. & O. boat, an East Indiaman. They always have white officers but Lascar crews; probably kept most o' the Lascars even when she began running transport after the war started; those Lascars make good sailors. Most likely when that lousy white skipper took his crew off the *Strathallan* in such a bloody rush to get his worthless carcass aboard those destroyers, this poor devil must have been somewhere below and they left him. Wonder how he felt when he came on deck to find himself last man on a deserted and burning ship with all the boats gone? And then trying to get away from the fire, crawled down the painter to that raft just to be roasted there instead? Well, Sid Everett'll go to work on him now till he has to board the *Strathallan* himself. Sid's good at that. But that Hindoo'd better come to in a hurry, because Sid won't have much time." Harding stepped back alongside his helmsman.

We were well aft on the *Strathallan*'s starboard quarter by then. Harding started to swing his own little ship to starboard to circle her stern and come up under her counter on the windward side. A little more in the open there, while we could still see the *Laforey* to leeward, I sent another signal to her, asking that the trawlers pick up again the drifting towing hawsers, swing the *Strathallan* 180°, and head south for Oran with her and us while we fought the fire. The *Laforey* blinked back in acknowledgment.

Dead slow, we rounded to in the heavy swell rolling by under the stern of the *Strathallan* towering high above us and sidled up alongside her port quarter, just abaft the break of her superstructure. From there aft to her stern on the windward side, she wasn't afire yet. But getting aboard her to secure ourselves was still a problem. There wasn't anyone on her to catch our heaving lines and haul

aboard our hawsers or to send us down any of their own; and her decks were so high above ours, we couldn't jump to hers. To make matters worse, our superstructure was pounding heavily against the thick sides of the transport as we rolled to seas which affected her hardly at all. The *King Salvor* was going to take a bad beating and plenty of damage to her topsides before we got through with the *Strathallan*, but there was no help for it. She'd have to take it.

Teddy Brown, still under the weather from his boat trip, settled the mooring problem by scrambling to the signal platform over our bridge, the highest point on the *King Salvor*, and leaping in a frenzied broad jump from there to the railing of the *Strathallan's* well deck, her lowest. With Teddy scurrying back and forth amongst the bits as the *Strathallan's* whole deck force, we soon had lines enough aboard her to hold us close alongside, with our own stern protruding slightly aft of hers and our stem just abaft her burning superstructure. With other seamen soon clambering up those hawsers to help, our limp fire hoses began to uncoil from our own deck and snake upward over our rails and up the high sides of the *Strathallan*.

I started to climb to the platform over the bridge to leap aboard her myself. Harding stopped me,

"Here, take this, Captain. You'll need it." He passed me a tin hat.

"What for?" I asked him.

"You'll find out bloody quick! Put it on!"

I was in a hurry. Presumably Harding felt that G.I. tin hat was the best substitute available for a fireman's helmet. With no further argument, I took it, tossed aside my navy cap, slid the steel helmet down over my head, buckled the strap under my chin, climbed to the platform above, and waiting only for the *King Salvor* to rise to the next wave to put me as high as possible, dived for the *Strathallan's* teak rail. I slid over it on my stomach, dropped down to land on her main deck, her lowest passenger deck.

Just aft of me Teddy Brown and half a dozen British sailors were frantically hauling aboard the hose lines. It would take them a few minutes yet to get slack enough on those hoses over the *Strathallan's* rail to run them forward and get into action. It was

up to me in that interval to decide where they had best go.

I looked about. Right aft on the stern rose a sizable steel deck-house surmounted by a 6-inch naval gun, trained dead aft, deserted of course. Right forward of me, rising two decks higher yet to the boat deck, was her huge superstructure, the main passenger quarters, all ablaze athwartships from port to starboard and up to the boat deck. I was in a sort of well deck space abaft the superstructure, with the upper decks in my vicinity not quite the full width of the ship and all open at the sides. A little inboard of me on the center line was a considerable open-air swimming pool, green tiled, full of water, looking cool and inviting in otherwise rather hot surroundings.

I took a few steps inboard to look forward up the passageway inside the superstructure, off which the port side staterooms opened. That corridor was one solid mass of yellow flame. So was the similar corridor to starboard, when I crossed the deck to examine it. We wouldn't be doing any going forward on that deck, either on the windward or the leeward side. I started up one of the broad well deck ladders to sight conditions on the next deck above.

Halfway up, I paused, startled. Through the roaring of the flames, I suddenly caught the sound of guns firing in short bursts, 20-mm. guns at least, coming from directly over my head. Then interspersed with the staccato explosions of the guns came the rattling of shrapnel on the steel decks above me with bits of flying steel ricochetting past me down the ladder. Planes must be strafing us from the air! Involuntarily I shot the rest of the way up that ladder to seek shelter nearer the center line, under the next deck up, well inboard of the exposed ladder well.

The firing ceased a moment, then recommenced. So did the hail of shrapnel, which I could see now as fragments of exploded shells plentifully littering the outer edges of the deck, with more pouring down. But it was all completely unbelievable. That Nazi planes had come out to strafe us I could imagine, for a troopship is an inviting target, though I had seen no planes about, not even ours. But why should they want to strafe an *abandoned* troopship? However, accepting that as a possibility due to lack of knowledge on the enemy's part, the rest was still wholly inconceivable. How could

anybody possibly live on that flaming boat deck overhead amidships (where as we had passed alongside in the *King Salvador*, I had seen the A.A. guns poking skyward through the smoke) to man those guns and fire back at the planes? And even if men could, who could they be? There wasn't a living soul aboard the *Strathallan* to fire them, save we few who had just boarded her, and we certainly were not. It just couldn't be!

But it was. The guns close by over my head on that deserted ship started firing again. It was too much. My tin-helmeted head sagged down into my hands. I must be crazy; all alone on the abandoned *Strathallan*, I must suddenly have cracked up at last to be so imagining such an unimaginable occurrence. There were those I had left behind me in Massawa who had been telling me I was on the verge of it. Now it had happened. Probably if I could see my own face now, it would be as void of all semblance of human intelligence as those of some of the gibbering idiots, battle shell-shock cases, whom I had seen in Egypt coming out of the line after taking too much in the desert.

My twitching hands fingering my tin hat brought something to my memory. Harding had insisted I wear that helmet, that I'd need it, that I'd find out why damned soon. Harding must have had a reason; he was a very phlegmatic person, given to no brainstorms; he must already have observed something I'd missed with my mind on other matters. Suddenly, in a wave of blessed relief, I saw the answer. I wasn't crazy after all!

Those guns were firing, all right, and continuing to fire even though there *wasn't* anybody up there in the flames to fire them. And no ghosts were doing it, either. The flames themselves were doing it! For those were all *automatic* A.A. guns which must have been left loaded and at the "Ready" when the ship was abandoned. Now as the cartridge in each breech got hot enough and the powder exploded, even though no trigger was ever pulled, it automatically ejected its empty case and reloaded the gun with the next cartridge in the belt, which in its turn when it got hot enough, repeated the performance. No one gun fired more than one round at a time, but there were dozens of those 20-mm. guns up there, enough to give the impression of intermittent short bursts as they went off errati-

cally, depending on how the flames licked their breeches.

It was all very rational indeed. Harding must have observed it before we secured alongside, to have forced that tin hat on me. Now I too knew why, though possibly it had taken me longer than Harding had figured to find out. There weren't any strafing planes, there weren't any ghostly gunners to worry about, I could rest assured I was at least as sane as when I had shoved off from Oran. But the shrapnel from overheated shells bursting practically at muzzle-mouth was real enough. That was going to be something for those of us who had to fight the fire out on the open decks to worry about. Silently I thanked Harding for my tin hat. I wished I had a breastplate also.

WITH NOT A SINGLE GROUSE FROM any man, wholly undaunted by that terrifying conflagration, the little group of worn-out British seamen off the *King Salvor*, led by Captain Harding personally, swarmed aboard the *Strathallan* and waded fiercely into the fire. Twelve pulsating hose lines were strung over the *Strathallan's* main deck rail, every hose swelled hard as iron now with water from the *King Salvor's* engine room pumps. Dragging those twelve hoses, the sailors turned to to drive that fire forward and contain it there till we could tow the burning troopship into port, a twenty-hour task at least—if we didn't stop another torpedo sooner or perhaps a whole salvo of them and, trapped inside, go down with her like a rock.

The men were set as I wanted them. Four hose lines, each shooting a powerful jet from a two and a half inch diameter fire nozzle onto the flames, were deployed on each of the *Strathallan's* three upper decks. Two seamen were clinging to each nozzle and playing it on the fire practically under their noses.

Except up on the boat deck, we were now right inside the burning superstructure itself at close quarters with the fire, working our way up the flaming passages. Two hose lines and four seamen were deep inside each passageway. A fifth man was at the after entrance to each corridor, keeping anxious watch through the smoke and the steam on his shipmates lest they suddenly be overwhelmed in there with no one knowing it, and taking turn about with those inside on the hoses in spelling them for a breath of air.

Altogether, we had thirty men aboard the *Strathallan*, aside from Harding and me. Our nineteen remaining men under the Chief

Engineer, Andy Duncan, were left on the *King Salvor* to keep her auxiliaries and pumps going to feed us the water on which the lives of most of that thirty now wholly depended, and to keep watch on our surging mooring lines and hoses lest they be parted between the two erratically rolling ships.

The first half hour had been tough and uncertain as to results, in getting the hoses run out and in fighting for a foothold on the two lower decks so we could even get a start. It had been a man-killing job dousing the flames pouring out each one of those corridor entrances sufficiently to get inside them to begin playing water on the fire beyond. We had no smoke masks, we had no asbestos suits, we had nothing but leather gloves and tin hats in the way of protective equipment. There had been a fierce battle at every corridor entrance, with one pair of sailors playing their hose on their shipmates, the other pair, to keep the latter from being incinerated as they stood practically in the fire at the entrance working the second hose around inside enough to let them enter and get going. But they had finally all made it.

Now in every corridor, our seamen were well inside and steadily working their hoses forward. But it was inhuman work, better suited to demons out of hell. As I groped my way along the lower port passageway to inspect things there, guided only by the two canvas-covered hose lines writhing in the hot embers on the still hotter steel deck under my feet, I might as well have been in a furnace myself. On both sides of me and overhead, even though the fire had been smothered there, the warped bulkheads and deck beams still glowed red with the charred woodwork all smoldering, furnishing more light than was desirable in view of the intolerable heat being radiated with it from all about.

Shortly I came up to the four men manning the nozzles there, playing them on the flames crackling ahead and in the staterooms each side of them.

Here indeed and no mistake was hell itself—leaping flames, choking smoke, and vast clouds of scalding steam which the jets of water had turned into almost instantly the moment they hit the red hot bulkheads and the decks overhead and underfoot. I peered through the sizzling fog at the four men there enveloped

in the steaming mist—they were clinging like grim death to their hose nozzles, eyes closed most of the time, their sweating torsos naked to the waist glowing red themselves in the reflection of the flames. I thought I recognized one—I winked my eyes violently to clear them a bit, then looked closer. Yes, it was Jock Brown, Fourth Engineer, manning the leading nozzle—Jock, whom I had last worked with on a wreck diving in the oil and the water in the flooded wardroom of the sinking *Porcupine* to seal off her leaking manhole covers. I might have expected it would be that Scotchman Jock and his gang I should find farthest inside the flaming inferno that was the *Strathallan*. I didn't recognize any of his mates—others in the *King Salvador's* black gang, I supposed. Well, they were now all black, all right, except where they were red, for from their tin helmets down, their blistered but glistening bodies were streaked with charcoal from burning embers which had hit them.

I didn't stay to say hello. They seemed to be doing all right, since, though they all blinked momentarily at me, they were all too busy even to open their tightly clenched jaws. Besides, I was sufficiently cooked myself for the moment. That was the fourth (and last) burning corridor I had just dragged myself through to check progress, and I needed to cool off. I turned, and keeping my stinging eyes closed as much as I dared without falling flat on my face on the scorching deck, and breathing as little as I could of the mingled smoke and superheated steam that formed all there was for atmosphere in that passageway, I stumbled back along the fire hoses for a guide to the well deck aft.

Out in the open again where at least the air was mostly air though it was still infernally hot, I leaned against the athwartship superstructure bulkhead. Half-blinded, I gasped like a fish out of water, sucking vast quantities of oxygen into my scorched lungs. Then I went in search of Harding. He was on the boat deck.

On the boat deck, things had been different, though it was hard to say whether they'd been any better. Up on the boat deck, it wasn't so hot—there the men were merely getting seared by radiation from the flames forward and overhead instead of being roasted from hot steel all around as in the ovens down below. And there was certainly more air. But to offset these advantages, they were all

the while exposed to the shrapnel from bursting 20-mm. shells. That eerie performance of those damned unmanned sky-guns was still automatically going on and there was nothing we could do to ring down the curtain and stop it—at least for all the guns beyond easy range of our hoses—those we couldn't reach with a stream of water to cool down occasionally.

Fortunately for us, while everybody's tin hat had caught plenty coming down from overhead and several men had already been hard hit by hot shrapnel coming in at flatter angles, none of the wounds had been serious enough yet to knock any of the men on the boat deck more than temporarily out of action. That, I supposed, was due to the fact that all the shell bursts were low order explosions from overheated TNT, not high order detonations from the impact fuses. Consequently the velocities of the flying fragments were much less than normal. At any rate, that strafing from the unmanned guns forward of us hadn't yet driven us off the boat deck, and apparently wasn't going to, much as it kept all hands on the topside ducking involuntarily each time the guns commenced firing again.

Nevertheless Harding was greatly worried, and as soon as I hove in sight up the ladder, he let me have it. He was afraid of a major explosion right aft which would send us all sky high any moment, as well as sinking the *King Salvador* close alongside.

Conditions had changed since we had first boarded the *Strathallan*. The armed trawler *Restive* had picked up both towlines and aided by the other trawler, the *Active*, pushing directly on the *Strathallan*'s stem, had slowly swung her around roughly 180° through the wind. Now with the turn finally completed, both trawlers were towing her directly for Oran sixty miles away, speed between three and four knots, all they could make with such a heavy drag astern.

So now we had the wind on the starboard side of the *Strathallan*, not on her port side as in the beginning, and as an unwelcome result the *King Salvador* was to leeward of her. For unfortunately, due to the course we had to steer to make port, the wind was no longer directly abeam as when the vessel had been drifting free, broadside to it. Now it was to a fair degree from ahead, on her starboard bow.

That had immediately made matters on the topside worse for

everybody, but there was no help for it. For now the flames and smoke from forward were being swept diagonally aft on the boat deck right over our heads and over the *King Salvor* secured to the new lee quarter. While we had successfully driven the fire forward somewhat on the boat deck, as well as below, still the flames from amidships were sweeping right over us, carrying sizable burning embers with them in a fierce updraft, and dropping some of the heavier of them not only on the boat deck astern of us not yet afire but also on the *King Salvor*.

About the *King Salvor*, Harding wasn't concerned. His signalman and a couple of seamen left there to tend lines, were frenziedly working with buckets of sea water, scurrying around to souse every burning brand as it came down on her topsides. He was confident they could keep the *King Salvor* from becoming another *Strathallan* on a tiny scale. It was the *Strathallan* herself that had him worried.

"Look at that, Captain!" he burst out the moment I showed up on the boat deck. He pointed dead aft.

I looked. Harding was pointing at the deserted 6-inch gun on a wide circular platform right on the *Strathallan*'s stern. The gun platform, like everything else about, was littered with shrapnel and glowing embers. But that gun platform was all steel; I didn't see how it could catch fire, and of course the gun couldn't.

"What about it?" I asked, very puzzled, for it wasn't like the unemotional Harding to get wrought up over anything.

"The deckhouse that gun's standing on is the main magazine aft! I've sighted it all around to be sure!" he shouted to make himself heard above the uproar of the fire and of the exploding A.A. guns. "It's jammed full o' 6-inch powder charges, as well as shells for that gun! There's five tons o' smokeless powder at least in that magazine, let alone the TNT filling all the shells for that hundred-pounder there! And it's blasted hot in that magazine already, with the paint on the outside starting to blister. If it gets any hotter there from this damned backdraft and all the hot stuff raining down on it, that magazine'll go up and we'll all go with it! We'd better turn all hands to heaving that ammo overboard, four bells, before she blows on us!"

I took another look, then shook my head. Probably the usually stolid Harding was right enough in his unusual perturbation over the new danger. With the wind as it now was, it was only a question of time till those cordite charges got hot enough to explode the magazine. And probably also there *were* the five tons of powder that he feared in that magazine, and some fifteen tons of 6-inch shells beside, twenty tons all told of mingled high explosives that would take all our men to handle. Even with all of them working on it, it could well take us more than half an hour to jettison over the stern the contents of that magazine.

But I couldn't see it. If we did that, we might as well quit. For if we dragged the men off their hoses for half an hour to jettison powder and shell, we'd lose everything we'd already gained on the fire, maybe more, and have to make a completely fresh start on it outside the reignited superstructure when we'd finished manhandling overboard that twenty tons of cordite and steel. However, aside from the added fatigue by then, I doubted if any man could bring himself to go through that battle at the corridor entrances a second time to break in against the flames and then have to fight his way forward again over ground he'd once cooked himself to gain and then had thrown away—not now when he knew what it meant. Willing as they all were, I was sure they'd all wilt at that prospect. I couldn't ask them to do it.

Still, something had to be done about the magazine, and that soon, or unquestionably that twenty tons of ammunition would blow up exactly as Harding feared. Of course, when that happened we could quit worrying about the fire and could write off the *Strathallan*, except that we wouldn't any of us be around to be doing either any worrying or any writing off.

There was, however, another way out, though it had drawbacks. We could take a couple of the hose lines working forward of us on the boat deck, turn them aft, and keep them playing on the magazine decks and bulkheads to hold its temperature within safe bounds. However, if I did that, we'd not only quit making progress on the boat deck but it was dubious that we'd be able to hold what we'd already gained there. Still, it seemed the only alternative, and something had to be done immediately.

I told Harding I would not quit fighting the fire to jettison the ammunition; we would avoid explosion by playing hoses on the magazine instead. He could take one hose line from forward for a start; if that didn't cool things down enough to suit him, he could take two. But no more.

The idea appealed to Harding and after pondering it a moment he acquiesced. But when he turned forward to consider which of his four hose lines he could best spare to turn about for the job, the sight of that awesome fire front amidships sweeping up to enshroud the smokestacks and then curving in a vast ruddy arc aft over our heads, made him decide he couldn't spare any. He promptly thought up a better idea.

Just abaft the *King Salvor*'s bridge was a latticed steel tower surmounted by a fire monitor, a large fire nozzle mounted with training and elevating gears so it could be swung about like an A.A. gun. We weren't using it, because it didn't have range enough from where the low *King Salvor* was tied up well astern effectively to reach the fire far up on the boat deck and forward on the superstructure. But it should be able to cover the *Strathallan*'s stern like a fountain, and it had the further advantage that when once set in train and elevation, it required no attendance thereafter. It was just the thing to give that magazine on the stern a generous shower bath, and to keep on doing it! Harding started on the run down the ladders from the boat deck to board his ship again and swing that fire monitor into action.

In a few minutes it was going, shooting a thick stream of water almost vertically into the air, aimed to come down in a heavy spray all over the *Strathallan*'s near by stern, drenching the 6-inch gun and its platform, and streaming down the four sides of the magazine to cool it beautifully. I gave up worrying further about the magazine; so did Harding, who shortly rejoined me up on the boat deck where I, as well as the magazine, was cooling off in that heaven-sent shower.

That fixed everything. We no longer had any worries. We were gaining steadily on the fire, we had washed out the danger of a magazine explosion in our rear, we were sure to win and get the *Strathallan* into port.

I had the measure of that fire now. Ultimately we could extinguish it in the superstructure, keep it from getting a foothold either in the stern or in the bow, and hold it to the blazing fire-rooms deep in the bowels of the ship below. The fire there we could not hope to extinguish at sea—it was fed by fuel oil streaming into the firerooms from strained oil bunkers all about them, and against burning oil, water was worse than useless. That flaming oil could be put out only by smothering those firerooms in thick blankets of firefoam spread all over the blazing liquid surfaces. We had no foam equipment on the *King Salvor* for such a task, nor the tons and tons of foam powder it would take for the job. But at least after we had knocked out the fire in the superstructure, we could contain that burning fuel oil to the firerooms by continuous work with our hoses till we got in and keep it from reigniting the rest of the ship. Once in port, with all the foam equipment there, we could then smother the conflagration in the fire-rooms and our task would be over.

There was nothing further for us to worry ourselves about—save the stark fact that it would take eighteen hours more at least of battling the flames before we got into port and it was a certainty that before two hours more of those eighteen were out, we wouldn't have a single seaman left on his feet able to hold a nozzle, if any one of them lasted even that long. We had everything we needed to save that huge troopship—except men enough. Without at least an equal number to our little force to spell all our men at the hoses, two hours on, two hours off, we must lose. However willing, however dogged, there were limits to what human flesh could stand for long. We had to have more men at once or the *Strathallan* was lost.

There was only one possible place we could get any—the *Laforey*. For the first time in the hour since we had boarded the *Strathallan*, I looked about again over the sea for her. What struck me first was how dark it was getting; that short December day was fading and night was coming on rapidly, though before with the splendid artificial illumination we were receiving on our job, I hadn't observed it. It wouldn't be long now till the blacked-out *Laforey* would be invisible somewhere off in the darkness, though neither

she nor any solicitous U-boat hanging about would have the slightest difficulty in seeing us all through the night.

There was the *Laforey* in the dusk, at the moment about a mile away, zigzagging to the northward of us off our stern, clear of the smoke.

"Come on, Harding," I suggested. "Let's signal the *Laforey* and ask her to send forty men to alternate with us. She ought to have two hundred at least aboard; certainly she can spare us forty to help save this ship."

Together we started down the ladder from the boat deck, a little regretful at having to get out from under our cooling shower. On the next deck down, I spotted Sid Everett, taking his brief spell standing watch outside at the starboard corridor entrance. Sid looked ghastly from his last turn inside with the fire.

"How'd you make out with that Hindoo, Sid?" I asked in passing. "Did you bring him to?"

"I did, Cap'n, right enough," mumbled the exhausted third mate, "an' lively too! I soaked 'is nose in ammonia, shoved a shot o' Scotch between 'is teeth, an' 'e gasped an' opened his eyes, four bells an' a jingle. I 'ad to leave 'im then. But I'm bloomin' sorry I wasted the Scotch on 'im, Cap'n; I could bloody well use it on m'self right now. I might 'a done the job on that Hindoo just with the ammonia!"

I nodded commiseratingly at Sid, continued down the ladders to the main deck below. Well, at least we had revived our rescued Lascar; that was something.

Harding, who had descended first, was waiting for me at the foot of the ladder. I started for the *King Savior*'s upper platform heaving alongside us to port, which was about all I could see of our little ship above the *Strathallan*'s main deck rail even when she lifted to a wave crest. But Harding stopped me.

"Cast your eye on that, Captain," he said bitterly, pointing inboard toward the *Strathallan*'s swimming pool.

I had hastily noted in passing the existence of that swimming pool full of water my first few seconds aboard, but since then in all the hubbub I had paid no further attention to it. Now I looked at it again, more closely.

"That," to which Captain Harding was pointing, was a beautiful new gasoline motor-driven portable fire pump on rubber-tired wheels, standing close to the far side of the swimming pool. Its heavy suction hose was coupled up, all ready to drop into the water of the pool, and a few lengths of fire hose lay on deck, limp, of course, but also coupled to one of the discharges of the pump. So after all, Harding had had a portable fire pump on the *King Salvador*. And now he had it aboard the *Strathallan*, ready to go, though without anybody to man the extra hoses it could supply.

"Looks good to me, skipper," I said approvingly, wondering why all the sarcasm in Harding's voice. "We can use that too when we get some more men from the *Laforey*. But I thought you told me you didn't have any?"

"That's right, and that's the meat of it, blast it all!" cursed Harding. "That fire pump belongs to the *Strathallan*, not to me, and it's been a'standing there by that swimming pool ready to go all the while. Y' might 'a thought the crew o' the *Strathallan*'d abandoned her 'cause their engine room was flooded and maybe they had no pumps at all anywhere else to hold down that fire below, mightn't y' now? But there's that portable—all set to go alongside that swimming pool and never even run before! There'd never been a drop o' water through that pump. When first I sighted it that way I thought o' course she must be broken down and wouldn't pump so I didn't bother with it. But later when we were all set, I got curious and I took a minute off to see. So Teddy Brown and I turned to on it and she started when we cranked 'er up with no trouble at all and ran four bells. Just to make sure of 'er for an anchor to windward, we even dropped the suction hose into that big pool for a minute and she grabbed a suction right off and pumped fine. But seeing as I hadn't anybody to man any more hoses, I shut 'er down again so's not to waste the water in that pool, which may come in handy yet!" Harding paused a moment for breath in his efforts to make himself heard, then finished caustically,

"An' to think they abandoned a fine ship like this, without even trying to use what they had in their hands to fight the fire! An' when they shoved themselves off on those destroyers, the fire on the topside anyway couldn't 'a been much. There's lots else besides I've

sighted since I came aboard that shows what kind o' sailors they must 'a been!"

So embittered that if he hadn't already been scorched a fiery red he would have been blue in the face, Captain Harding turned away from that idle fire pump to board his own tiny ship. I followed him silently. He had covered the situation—nothing could be added to his scornful castigation of that panic-stricken crew.

Watching till the heaving signal platform of our ship synchronized with the wide teak railing of the *Strathallan*, we leaped across. Harding sang out to his signalman to belay for a moment chasing about after embers with his bucket, to get his signal lantern again, and to accompany us aft to the fantail where we could see the *Laforey*. Shortly we were all there, and our signal lantern was flashing through the dusk to the distant destroyer astern, asking her to send us forty seamen to alternate with ours in fighting the fire. There was an immediate acknowledging flash, then a short interval, and the answer came blinking back,

"CERTAINLY. CAN YOU SEND YOUR BOAT FOR THEM?"

That seemed reasonable enough, since we already had a boat in the water, and the *Laforey*, compelled to keep moving at considerable speed, hadn't. So I replied it would be sent at once.

Harding immediately broke one of Andy Duncan's scant remaining engineers off the auxiliaries below, took one of his even scantier deck force off chasing fires on his own topside, and sent them both away in the boat to bring back with them the promised assistance.

"And your mates on the *Strathallan*'ll thank y' kindly to shake a leg going both ways with their reliefs!" he shouted to his men in the boat as they shoved off. "They're all about cooked by now!"

We watched the boat for a few minutes rising and falling crazily to a quartering sea as it chugged off at six knots, its best speed. It was a good boat, not fast, but roomy and seaworthy; it would be just about big enough to take the forty men off the *Laforey* in one trip. However, it wasn't a quarter of a mile along on its way when I began to regret I hadn't gone in it myself for a discussion with the *Laforey*'s skipper over the arrangements for the night which was rapidly closing in, both in case we got torpedoed again, and

in case we didn't, but various other contingencies arose. This would especially be necessary if anything should happen requiring quick communication with the towing trawlers. We couldn't see them nor could they see us because of the fire between, though the *Laforey* could keep us both, well illuminated by the fire, in view most of the time.

But it was undesirable to delay the arrival of those imperative reliefs by calling the boat back for me. And besides if it were ready to shove off from the *Laforey* with the relief party before I finished the discussion with her skipper, I should be in the unwelcome position either of delaying the reliefs again or of leaving our arrangements only half settled.

I decided I had better go in a separate boat. Harding had another which could be lowered quickly from his port davits, his clear side. I would act as coxswain; all that would be required for crew would be one other man as engineer so as to deplete the *King Salvador's* remaining skeleton of a ship's force as little as possible. So far as the *Strathallan* herself was concerned, everything was well in hand and she could safely be left to Harding to carry on during the hour I should probably be gone.

Harding had only one objection. The engine in his port boat badly needed a thorough mechanical overhaul, was unreliable, and might break down, leaving me adrift in the open ocean. That would be especially bad if it occurred on my return trip, which would have to be made when it was completely dark and nobody could see me nor dare to turn on a searchlight to do any looking for a drifting boat. I considered that a moment, then decided it had to be hazarded. I should take a pair of good flashlights in the boat with me so at least I could flash an SOS roundabout if we broke down completely, and trust that the *Laforey* might see it and rescue us. I should warn that destroyer to keep a bright lookout for signals during my return trip.

One more engineer was stripped out of the black gang, leaving poor Andy Duncan wondering whether the semi-conscious Hindoo sailor lying in our wardroom could be kept on his feet long enough to warrant turning him to with an oil can. But leaving that unsettled, the engineer and I climbed up into the boat. With some

difficulty, between us we got the engine coughing spasmodically. At that, Harding and his signalman swung out the boat and lowered it away till it splashed into the sea. We two in it hurriedly cast it loose from the boatfalls lest it swamp, even at only three knots headway on the tow. The engineer leaped from the forward disengaging block to throw in his clutch; with equal haste, when the after block was freed, I seized the tiller to sheer off.

In another moment, we were tossing badly in the seaway, swinging in a half circle to head aft for the *Laforey*. Very promptly I saw that the sea which had seemed only moderate from the *Strathallan* and not so bad even from the *King Salvor*, was a rough sea for a small boat, even when taking it on the quarter. It kept me fully occupied at the tiller to hold a reasonable course for the destroyer in that corkscrewing boat. Long before I was through I ached for a steering oar to hold her steady, instead of that tiller and a rudder half the time out of water and worthless.

There were other troubles. The *Laforey*, starting to fade into only a shadow in the dusk, was underway for her own safety and steering no fixed course herself. I had to guess where she was going to be at the end of the next fifteen minutes, which was the time I estimated it would take us for the trip. But as the *Laforey* was purposely maneuvering to make such a guess extremely inaccurate for a U-boat bent on using her as a target, she wasn't making it very simple for me and my tossing little craft aiming also for an interception.

As the last straw, our worn-out engine (which had not once made a complete revolution firing on all cylinders and over which my engineer was constantly tinkering, trying to improve matters) caught a heavy sheet of spray coming over our weather quarter and quit cold. In a moment, in spite of my best efforts at the tiller, we were swung broadside to the seas, there to wallow heavily among the breaking waves and driving spray as we drifted helplessly dead to leeward before wind and sea in the increasing darkness.

The engineer stopped tinkering with the carburetor he had been trying to adjust, and started to crank frantically. Not even a cough. I dropped the useless tiller, ripped a one-quart fire extinguisher from out its bracket beneath the sternsheets, twisted the handle to

unlock it, and began furiously to spray carbon tetrachloride all over the spark plugs, the ignition wiring, and the magneto, to dry them out, meanwhile with my body shielding the engine as best I might from a further bath.

It worked. A few more revolutions and the engine began to fire unevenly, no better than before, but at least to fire again. Hastily I dropped the open metal engine covers down about the engine to protect it from any more spray, and told the engineer we'd go the rest of the way with the engine limping along as well as it could, but at least limping; we'd quit striving for improvement. Then I leaped back for the tiller to straighten out the boat again.

About five minutes later we were alongside the *Laforey*, which had obligingly sheered over toward us and slowed briefly to let us catch up. Her port side ladder was overboard. Our first boat was already secured to that and we secured directly alongside the destroyer herself, astern and inboard of our other boat, after which the *Laforey* speeded up again. I clambered across and into the other boat, then climbed the side ladder, followed by my engineer. He said he would try to obtain from the destroyer's stores a set of new spark plugs ("sparking" plugs to him) which he felt might improve things for our return trip. I was wholeheartedly willing to let him try; it was too bad, I thought, in that short interval that he couldn't procure a whole new engine instead.

As I came over the rail, the *Laforey*'s executive officer, a lieutenant commander, met me. He apologized; his captain, he said, dared not leave the bridge. Would I mind stepping up there to talk with him?

I wouldn't, of course, but I paused first a moment. Lined up on deck just abaft the port gangway opening was the fire party, about ready to embark for the *Strathallan*. I looked them over in the last remnants of the fast-fading twilight. There was just light enough left now to make things out at close quarters.

It was a fine looking fire party, all husky British seamen, and beautifully fitted out. With all those well-equipped men as reliefs on the hoses, we should certainly save the *Strathallan* now. Some of the seamen carried smoke masks, a few others had rolled-up asbestos suits draped over their shoulders, all had tin hats and in addition

smoke goggles for eye protection. They even had a rescue breathing apparatus in a heavy case to revive a man knocked out by smoke, and the British equivalent of a hospital corpsman to take care of the injured. As I looked them over, they began to stream by me down the side ladder and into our waiting boat. Last of all went the two officers in charge of them, a sub-lieutenant and a lieutenant, R.N. I stopped the lieutenant, the last man, to give him some brief instructions.

"You'll find Captain Harding of the *King Salvor* in charge when you get there, Lieutenant. Lay alongside her and report yourself to him. Have your men relieve his crew immediately on the hoses aboard the *Strathallan*; they'll have had a two-hour stretch at it by then. After that, you're to alternate with his men—two hours on, two hours off, on the hoses till we make port. Understand, Lieutenant?"

He nodded. He understood. It was quite simple. He dropped down the side ladder into the boat. The *Laforey* slowed again momentarily to let them cast off; as they swung clear, she speeded up once more. Accompanied by her exec, I started up her port side for the bridge.

As I went, I looked briefly about. The *Laforey* was a huge destroyer, one of the two largest Britain had. Specially built as one of a pair for squadron leaders, she was practically a young light cruiser, with her three main turrets, her numerous heavy A.A. guns, and her eight torpedo tubes in two quadruple mounts. I judged my first guess on her had been correct; she must easily have had at least two hundred men in her crew. Raking up forty for a fire party could have been no difficult task for her, though no doubt it stripped her of most of her gun crews.

Following the exec as a guide, I entered the superstructure forward and climbed an interior ladder to come out on her enclosed bridge, even darker there than it had been on deck. No light showed anywhere but a faint glow coming from the compass. The exec introduced me to his captain. Even in the gloom I was surprised to note, he *was* a captain—a four-striper, R.N., from the gold lace and curl over it on his overcoat shoulder marks. Before, I had assumed I would find at most a commander, as destroyer skippers

ordinarily were when they were not just lieutenant commanders. But, I reflected, the *Laforey* was a squadron leader, not an ordinary destroyer; this skipper was really commodore for a large number of destroyers, hence the assignment of an officer with considerably more than normal rank to that command.

But if I was surprised when introduced to the *Laforey*'s commanding officer, that surprise was nothing to the one I got when the latter promptly turned about and introduced me to another shadow on his bridge—the captain of the *Strathallan*! So of all persons, the captain of the deserted *Strathallan* was standing by as a spectator, watching his ship burn while others fought for her! And never signaling the *King Salvador* offering to come aboard her to help us with information as to his ship's layout, if nothing more!

We checked our position on the chart and stepped off the distance to land. With luck and the speed the trawlers were then making, and no increase in the wind and the sea, we should make Oran by around nine or ten o'clock next morning, a little better than I had hoped for. It was then somewhat past 6:30 P.M.; we should have about fifteen hours more of it—always providing there were no more torpedoes.

On that contingency the skipper of the *Laforey* was noncommittal. He would do his best with his Asdic and his depth charges to protect both himself and us during the night but— He shrugged his shoulders. No more comment on that was necessary. He and all the other destroyers under his command had been doing exactly that when the *Strathallan*, the biggest and most valuable ship in their convoy, had been selected by the U-boat as target for the first torpedo.

Whether he could do any better alone now with his Asdic, remained to be seen—much depended on that U-boat captain. Had he considered his torpedoed and burning victim already a loss and sought greener pastures? Or was he skeptical of results and following to watch, willing to attack again if we got the *Strathallan* close enough to port to make her rescue certain? This last wasn't the case yet; we were still far out to sea. The captain of the *Laforey* doubted that the U-boat would expend any more torpedoes on the *Strathallan* for some hours yet, at least until the flames were visibly

much reduced in volume.

But of course his own case was very different. A large destroyer like the *Laforey* was always an enticing target for a U-boat captain brave enough to risk attacking one. If this were the same U-boat which had attacked the *Porcupine* eleven days before, then he was brave enough, no question. The dark hours now enshrouding us would tell. They favored the U-boat captain in attacking the *Laforey*; even more so, if he wished to attack the slow-moving *Strathallan* again. She stood out in the night now like a huge torch, a perfect target for a long range shot which could be made almost with impunity whenever the U-boat captain considered it worth another torpedo or several of them.

To minimize that danger, the *Laforey* would shortly begin circling us in zigzags at high speed and at somewhat over extreme torpedo range as well as closer in, trying to search out beneath the sea the whole possible area of attack with her Asdic. And at my request, her captain agreed to keep close watch on the *King Salvador* for any signals, ready to communicate them if necessary to the towing trawlers.

Long before we had covered all this, we could see in the lurid glare from the *Strathallan* that our first boat had reached the *King Salvador* and discharged the new men. I sighed with relief at that. They had reached her nearly two hours after we had started fighting the fire; those first two hours would unquestionably have been the worst of all. Harding's men must have been made of cast iron if, after turning over their hose nozzles to the fresh seamen, they had been able to stagger down the fiery passages on their own feet on their way back to their bunks aboard the *King Salvador*. I could never have stood it myself half so long. We had been none too soon with reliefs for them.

A seaman fumbled his way up on the now totally dark destroyer bridge to tell the captain that my boat would be ready in about twenty minutes more. It seemed some of the motor mechanics on the *Laforey* were helping my man not only to change the spark plugs but also to tune up the whole ignition system and the carburetor; when they finished, the boat should be good enough for the return trip, anyway. I thanked the captain for his help.

The discussion was over. The captain of the *Laforey* turned back to conning his ship through the darkness on her weaving track. Had my boat been ready, I should have left immediately. But as I had no option except to wait till the mechanics got my engine tied together again, I felt I might as well learn what more I could of how many separate firerooms the *Strathallan* had, and how they were laid out. The knowledge would help when it came to smothering the fire below.

The sole source of information was that vague shadow apparently trying to efface itself in the blackness against the after bridge bulkhead. I hardly blamed the man for that. Could it be that now when he had left his ship in the face of danger, he might at leisure be remembering the British skipper of a sister P. & O. liner, the *Rawalpindi*? And how that captain had conducted himself earlier in the war when he was suddenly confronted in the Arctic twilight off Iceland by a Nazi battleship, heavily armored, bristling with triple-turrets and 11-inch guns against which his own few 6-inch rifles were but popguns and his unarmored merchant ship sides but cheese?

Against that powerful battleship, the *Rawalpindi* had not the chance of a snowball in hell, unless she turned instantly and fled off into the dusk where between her own high speed and the falling night, she could reasonably hope to escape unharmed. But that P. & O. skipper had also an obligation as a seaman from which he did not flinch even in the face of certain death. There were dozens of far more poorly armed and very slow freighters with him which would all die like sheep before a ravening wolf if he abandoned them by running to save himself.

He was a seaman. While the freighters separated to flee in all directions into the night, he steamed directly for that battleship to engage her—of a more valiant act, the long history of war at sea has no record! Of course the *Rawalpindi* was shot to pieces and went down before those flaming 11-inch turret guns, a fiery coffin for her captain and most of his crew. But before that finally happened, the sheep were well scattered in the long night, saved, most of them, from the fangs of the wolf which had to be satisfied mainly with the hollow victory over the *Rawalpindi*.

Dead now, the captain of that P. & O. liner and the *Rawalpindi* and her crew would live forever in the hearts of British seamen. I turned to the captain of the *Rawalpindi*'s much bigger sister to ask him a question about his abandoned *Strathallan*. With some difficulty, I made him out enough to step over to his side.

"Captain," I asked, "how many firerooms has the *Strathallan*, and which ones caught fire from the torpedo explosion? And why didn't you report that fire right off, instead of just the torpedo damage?"

"Not any of 'em," came the surprising reply. "The torpedo hit us in the engine room, where it killed my Chief Engineer. But it didn't set any stokeholds afire. There wasn't any fire to report till hours after."

"The torpedo didn't light you off?" I asked incredulously. "What did then?"

The skipper sought to explain. It was rather involved. His Chief Engineer was dead, his engine room was flooded, his ship was stopped. Not knowing what might happen, he busied himself getting away all his lifeboats in the darkness; it was 2 A.M. when he was hit. He managed that successfully, he said; about a thousand troops, including a hundred or more American women nurses, were shoved clear in the boats. That had gone all right. That left him with about 5000 others aboard, including his crew. No boats for any of them. There were still the rafts, which he started launching. But the ship showed no sign of sinking by then; he decided to wait till daylight.

Dawn came, late of course, it being the winter solstice. Still no danger of sinking, nor any other danger save that of another torpedo. He decided to wait further before loading rafts, especially as all his boats had drifted from sight during the night. On the rafts it would be worse in the cold seas; he would take to them only as a last resort.

Meanwhile through leaking bulkheads below some water was coming into the fireroom just forward of the flooded engine room; not enough, apparently, to endanger the ship by sinking her; enough, however, to be troublesome. But his Chief Engineer was dead; the other engineer fellows were taking care of it as well as

they could, which was poorly; he himself knew little about what was going on below (and, I judged, had never gone below himself to find out). It seemed there was some heavy fuel oil from badly leaking oil bunkers floating on top of the water in the bilges (I had seen the like on the *Porcupine* recently, where in his fireroom Bartley had extinguished his fires); those engineer fellows must have been careless; it would have been different if the Chief had been alive. They had allowed the water with the fuel oil on it to rise so high it had swashed into the boiler fireboxes (Why in the name of common sense, I wondered, hadn't someone ordered those boiler fires put out long before the water rose that high? They didn't need steam for the engines any more, and not much for anything.) with the result that it had lighted off and started a bad fire in the firerooms.

Unable to extinguish the fires in the boiler rooms (though they were pretty well confined to those spaces) he had concluded that with his engine room flooded from the torpedo damage and his boiler rooms aflame, the ship was a total loss. When the destroyers came alongside, he had abandoned her with the troops. For some reason I never got, he had himself boarded the *Laforey*, instead of going in on the other destroyers. And that was it.

I turned away. Apparently it had never entered the skipper's head that even a desperately wounded ship is still the captain's business to fight for while she floats, even if it no longer is necessarily considered the captain's business to go down with her.

I shuffled forward through the darkness to the bridge windows where, till I could go to rejoin them, I could at least watch some men fighting to save the ship, even at the eleventh hour.

But in a moment I received another jolt. For on the very stern of the *Strathallan*, dimmed somewhat in the smoke, a signal lamp started to blink at us. A signal quartermaster took down the message, passed it to the *Laforey*'s captain. The latter, shielding his flashlight, stooped low beneath his bridge rail to read it, then passed it to me. I did the same.

"CONSIDER IT TOO DANGEROUS TO REMAIN. REQUEST PERMISSION TO RETURN LAFOREY."

It was signed by the *Laforey*'s lieutenant in charge of her fire party.

I was so stunned, I could hardly pass the message back once I had read it. Too dangerous to remain on the *Strathallan* after we on the *King Salvador* had got over the worst of it and established a solid bridgehead inside her superstructure from which to battle that fire? How could any sailor claim so? Dangerous, yes; nearly everything in wartime was dangerous. But *too* dangerous? I couldn't believe my eyes!

"Sorry, Captain; I'll have to withdraw my men," I heard as I handed back to the skipper of the *Laforey* his signal.

"You can't do that!" I objected vehemently. "It's no more dangerous for your men than for mine, and mine're willing to stick it! If you take yours off, it leaves us with no reliefs at all and the *Strathallan*'s lost! You just can't do it!"

But he could and he would, in spite of my arguments and my pleas. If his lieutenant, whom he trusted, felt it was too dangerous, then it was too dangerous. He couldn't hazard his forty men—he might be in action the next day, any day. He couldn't fight the *Laforey* without those men; he wasn't going to hazard them and his ship to save the wreck of the *Strathallan*.

Bitterly I regretted that I was up against another four-striper, my equal in rank and possibly even a captain senior to me, rather than a commander or a lieutenant commander. One of the latter I might have overawed by an assumption of responsibility due to greater rank; whatever happened would be on my head, not his, as I was Senior Officer Present. But with this four-striper, it wouldn't work. I had to rely on argument and even on pleading with him.

I tried to point out that the Allies had several hundred destroyers about equal to the *Laforey*; they had not over a dozen transports as good or better than the *Strathallan*. Even to sacrifice the *Laforey* to save the *Strathallan* was worth it. He couldn't see it; to him the *Strathallan* was only a torpedoed and burning wreck, not worth much even if towed in.

In desperation I launched my last argument. He might lose some of his men; he certainly wouldn't lose all of them. We were gaining

on it all the while; the fire wasn't as bad as his lieutenant thought.

The skipper of the *Laforey* crouched down to look once again at the signal in his hand, then straightened up to gaze a moment at that volcano of flame that was the *Strathallan*, twice as lurid now against the blackness of the night skies. Then I got his last word.

My men and I could do what we pleased about the *Strathallan*. Salvage was our business but it wasn't his. He wasn't hazarding his men on her. He had to keep ready for action. Sorry. His blinker lantern started to flash out through the night the answer,

"WITHDRAW IMMEDIATELY."

22

ON MY WAY BACK IN MY BOAT TO the *King Salvor*, I passed close aboard in the darkness her other boat going in the opposite direction, laboring heavily through the seas, deeply loaded down with the ex-fire party, their lieutenant in the sternsheets alongside the coxswain. Silently the two boats passed each other in the night.

I had salvaged a little of the situation in a final compromise with the *Laforey*'s skipper, but not much. I had persuaded him this time not to order the trawlers to cut the *Strathallan* adrift again; they were to keep on towing her, even though we could no longer fight the fire. If the *King Salvor*'s men ever recuperated enough, we'd tackle it again by ourselves when we could. And if they never did, the *Strathallan* was to be towed anyway till we got to Oran where I could get help from ashore to fight what of course by then would be a far worse fire even than we had first encountered. We would save what then was left of the burning troopship.

Wan and worn in body but far sicker even at heart, I sheered my boat in alongside the port counter of the *King Salvor*. Captain Harding himself caught the painter the engineer tossed aboard, made it fast. I clambered wearily up over the low rail. I had left for the *Laforey* an hour before confident of victory; I returned wholly crushed. I had lost, we had lost. Danger, DANGER, DANGER! Run away from it, keep away from it! What, I wondered, was danger anyway? Harding and all his seamen on the *King Salvor* were apparently too stupid to discern what all sensible men, like the skipper of the *Strathallan* and that lieutenant off the *Laforey*, recognized instantly they saw it, even from a distance.

I looked up from the *King Salvador*'s low fantail to the high side of the *Strathallan* against which, as usual, the *King Salvador*'s superstructure was pounding heavily. Everything was about as I had left it an hour before, including, to my astonishment, those twelve hard-as-iron fire hoses still writhing continuously as the *King Salvador*'s engine room pumps pounded the water at high pressure through them to the *Strathallan*.

"How come, skipper?" I questioned, pointing to the hoses. "What's the good of pumping more water through those hoses? We're just wasting fuel. Shut down and salvage the abandoned hoses if you can. The *Laforey*'s men who were manning those nozzles last must be just about boarding their own ship by now."

"Those hoses ain't abandoned, Captain; they're still manned with my own men still hanging to 'em! There never was a *Laforey* man on a single one o' those hoses. They never touched 'em an' they none of 'em ever got near the fire!"

"They never manned the hoses? Why, I personally ordered their lieutenant to do exactly that the minute he got aboard here; that's all we needed 'em for! What, for Christ's sake, did he do then with all those men all that time they were aboard here?"

"He went four bells for that after deckhouse magazine no sooner he was aboard. He seemed to know all about it, an' he says to me he's going to jettison the ammo before it blows up. I told him not to worry about that magazine; we had it well cooled down with our fire monitor; it'd never blow up; for the love of God, let that magazine alone an' relieve my poor lads on the hoses! But I might as well 've saved my breath. He an' his men went at that magazine door with a sledge, smashed off the lock, then the whole lot of 'em turned to pitching powder cases an' shell over the stern.

"I thought, well, at least when they finish that, they'll turn to on the nozzles, so I kept my lads who'd been a'thinkin' they were about to be relieved, hangin' on to 'em. But I'll be goddamned, Captain, if that lieutenant, when the last case o' powder went over the side, didn't grab the signalman he'd brought along with him and start signaling his ship it was too dangerous to remain! I could hardly believe it! And then they get an affirmative from their ship, and the whole bloody lot of 'em, fire equipment an' all, shoves off

again without ever having done a blasted thing to help us, leaving my crew still on the hoses!"

I gazed at the captain of the *King Salvor*. Poor devil! How much, I wondered, is a man supposed to have to stand before he's led off in a strait-jacket? I really didn't know.

"So your men are still on those hoses!" I muttered wearily. "Well, now let's see if we can get 'em out o' there before they all drop and burn to death!"

But Harding couldn't see it. He was berserk now—he and his crew were going to stay with that fire and save the ship; they were *not* going to drop the hoses, reliefs or no reliefs, till we got her in!

Over Harding, at least, I had real authority; I didn't have to argue. If killing his men and himself too would put out that fire in the superstructure and assure me of getting that 25,000-ton troopship into port, it was worth the lives of fifty men. After all, commanders in wartime have sacrificed the lives of far more than that for far less gain—sometimes for only a few miles of worthless sand in the desert.

But the gain wasn't there to be won by the sacrifice; an hour more, probably less, and Harding and all his men would have collapsed in the flames; at best it would be fourteen hours yet till we could make port. And when we got in with the *Strathallan*, if we ever did, I needed most of all Harding and his men to resume the fight.

I *ordered* Harding to withdraw his men.

Broken-hearted, Harding obeyed. With hardly any life in him any more, he scaled the high sides of the *Strathallan* once again, there to get hold of Teddy Brown on the boat deck, Sid Everett on the next below, and Jock Brown on the main, and order a retreat. I went with him to see he didn't double-cross me in the order and tell them to stand firm instead.

We got all the men out, singed, blistered, blinded, bleeding—hardly men any more—just horrible looking seared carcasses barely able to stagger to the lower rail, there to be helped down onto the *King Salvor's* deck. The roaring fire, with the wind ahead, followed us aft in our retreat off the boat deck, down the passageways. The *King Salvor's* fire monitor was swung forward to cover the with-

drawal; the hose nozzles were all left going for what little good they might do thrashing about spurting water to help check the advance of the flames while the men stumbled aft, too weak to drag the heavy fire hoses backwards with them. When the last man of the fire party was lowered over the side down onto the *King Savior*, the few seamen on her deck were thrown aboard the *Strathallan* to drag back what hoses they could from the burning corridors and the boat deck. We managed to salvage about half the lines in the face of rapidly advancing flames.

With the unrestrained fire sweeping down on her, hanging on alongside on the lee quarter was now becoming impossible for the *King Savior*; Harding needed what few seamen he had left to cast loose. The rest of the hose was abandoned, the pumps below hurriedly shut down except to the fire monitor, the mooring hawsers cast off the troopship's bitts, and the last seaman on her deck made a wild leap for the *King Savior*'s topside before the sea opened too wide a gap.

A bell clanged below. The propeller started to churn astern, dragging us clear, while at the starboard rail, the signalman and a few others hacked furiously with axes at the remaining hose lines to free us of the *Strathallan*. Over all, our fire monitor, pointed vertically upward now, showered the *King Savior* herself in a heavy spray to keep her from going afire till she was clear.

C H A P T E R

23

ABOUT A QUARTER OF A MILE TO leeward of the *Strathallan* and dead abeam her, the *King Salvor* steamed slowly southward through the night on the troopship's port side, her low side. We were making about four knots; so also was the tow, which had speeded up a little once the trawlers ahead were relieved of the slight extra drag of towing the *King Salvor* as well as the torpedoed liner.

All was quiet as well as dark on the blacked-out salvage ship, short-handed both on her bridge and below in the machinery spaces, running only with the few men as watch standers who had not been on the hoses. The latter thirty, worn even beyond the power to groan over their miseries, were all silently stretched out in their bunks, though I doubted that any might be enjoying the blessed mercy of sleep.

Harding had the watch on the bridge, where I had taken station also to keep an eye on the *Strathallan*. Somewhere, far out in the darkness where the glare from the troopship would not give her away, the invisible *Laforey* must be zigzagging through the night, listening endlessly on her Asdic for any echo of a ping coming back to her from beneath the seas. I had not seen the *Laforey* again since I had left her. Astern of us dragged both our small boats; we had not men to spare to hoist them aboard. Ahead, at the end of the two long hawsers, the trawlers were clearly visible straining on the towlines, dragging their flaming burden through the seas toward faraway Oran.

The *Strathallan*, off to starboard of us where we could observe her better, was now a sight almost beyond description. In the two

and a half hours we had been aboard her, we had driven the fire forward about a quarter of the distance to her bridge. Within ten minutes after we had quit playing our hoses on her superstructure, it was all aflame again from end to end.

And now that fire rolling upward in the night was unimaginable. It had seemed horrible enough to look upon when we had first come to grips with it during the last fading hour of daylight; now against the night sky, it was truly terrifying to behold, even from a distance. My feelings toward that young lieutenant off the *Laforey* eased a bit—perhaps it had been too much to expect of him that the sight of that seething sea of fire at close range for the first time against the darkness of the night, would not paralyze him altogether.

All roundabout the *Strathallan* the breaking waves were gleaming red and orange, reflecting as in countless moving mirrors the leaping flames above. Overhead the rolling clouds of smoke glowed on their under sides a more fiery scarlet than any sunset I had ever seen. And in between the reddened sea and the ruddy clouds, flamed the *Strathallan*, her dark steel hull an immense devil's cauldron from which a mass of erupting flame leaped skyward, to envelop superstructure, smokestacks, and masts alike as it roared upward.

And as the last touch, now that the night skies furnished a better background, long streaks of fiery red tracers darted off in all directions to cut the sky to pieces and give the whole the appearance of a gigantic setpiece at a fireworks display—the ack-ack guns were still firing on the boat deck, with minor stores of explosives occasionally going off en masse.

We steamed on through the night. I wasn't much worried over torpedoes any more—at least not on the *Strathallan*. If the U-boat were following us, the *Laforey* might have cause enough for worry about herself. But if the U-boat captain were using as a criterion the amount of fire visible on the *Strathallan* as he eyed her through his periscope, then he certainly was justified in withholding any further torpedoes for a long time yet.

Midnight came. There was no changing of the watch. We had nobody to change with. We kept on southward. Thirty-six more miles to go yet; nine more hours.

Completely sick at heart, I watched the *Strathallan* as we plodded along by her side, to my sad eyes no spectacle, but an irreplaceable troopship which meant much to us in the winning of the war. Steadily she was being consumed in the unopposed flames gutting her, while I wondered how much of her, aside from her bare hull, might finally be left to fight for once we had men enough to resume the fight again.

For now the fire was slowly working its way forward of the bridge toward the foremast and the forecastle, even in the face of a moderate head wind. And of course she was aflame all the way to her stern in which direction the wind was pushing the fire.

Two a.m. Still we plodded southward. Still twenty-eight more miles to Oran; seven more hours.

The flames below her main deck were spreading forward and aft now to compartments and holds other than her already flaming firerooms, lighted off without doubt from above by the newly ignited upper hull above them. For the first time something I had never observed before, became startlingly prominent. Long horizontal rows of airports in the dark sides of her lower hull began to glow like a hundred rising suns, each illuminated from inside by the fire spreading there.

A new fear clutched my heart. Before I had never doubted (saving always more torpedoes) that we should at least get the hull of the *Strathallan* into port, badly burned out though it might be. But now I was no longer so sure, as I stared at that multitude of newly lighted up airports. One row especially, the lowest row, could hardly be a foot above her waterline on the side toward us, her port side, the torpedoed side, and the side toward which she was listed and deepest in the water.

For the fiery glow now showing through all those airports proved that the heavy inside metal battle covers (which every ship carries on her airports) were not swung down over the glass airports and dogged down hard, as they should be always on every vessel entering the war zone. And especially should that be so on a troopship at night, which had been the *Strathallan's* condition when torpedoed.

But they weren't—not one, high or low. And with the list on the port side of the ship bringing the lowest row of glass ports there

practically to the water's edge, a danger I had never imagined had leaped suddenly into prominence. For when the cold waves lapping the hull outside hit those glass ports, the glass would shatter after it got hot enough from the fire inside, leaving a row of large open holes right at the waterline through which the heaving seas would pour through and soon end everything. Those ports should every one have been sealed inside by their metal covers. What kind of officers had she had to let her enter the war zone with thousands and thousands of troops aboard and not a battle port in her lower hull sealed down?

I almost wept at the sight. This had put her wholly beyond the power of men to save. God help the *Strathallan* now!

Fascinated, Harding and I watched those glowing airports. They became brighter and brighter. Then a strange thing happened. From one after another, starting with those higher up where it was undoubtedly hottest, a sudden gush of molten fire seemed to spout, culminating in a torrent of fiery metal streaming downward into the sea.

The first time it occurred left me incredulous that my eyes were any longer honest with me. How could steel, hot though that fire might be, melt and run that way? But after the second or third spout of such molten streams, I understood. There was no steel melting and running there, much as it looked like it. What we were seeing were the thick glass airport lenses, one after another, melting suddenly from the flame inside and pouring down the side of the ship—fiery molten glass!

One after another, I watched the airport lenses melt out and gush into the sea, first the upper rows, then those halfway down, last of all every port in that row right on the waterline! On these last, the molten glass hardly had a chance to start pouring down before it soused into the water, extinguished.

There was no longer any hope at all—not in a rough sea with all those open holes right on her waterline and Oran still twenty-five miles away. I was very tired. I turned to Harding,

“Have me called, please, Captain, just before she goes. I’m stretching out for a little in my stateroom.”

Harding nodded, said nothing. I stepped aft into the starboard

cabin just abaft the bridge, flung myself, clothes and all, on the bunk, in an instant must have been dead to the world.

In another instant, so it felt to me, I was being rudely shaken to bring me to again. In the glare from outside, I made out Harding himself roughly yanking me by both shoulders.

"Turn out, Captain, if y' want to see the last of 'er! She's going!"

I rolled stiffly from the bunk, hardly able to open my eyes.

"What's the rush?" I protested. "I haven't been here a minute yet and you're turning me out already. She can't have got worse that fast."

"It's nearly four, an' y've been asleep well over an hour. Shake a leg! She won't last long now!"

I staggered from the cabin, in a few steps was on the bridge. I noted we weren't moving any longer, merely heaving idly to the sea. Looking ahead, I saw the trawlers weren't moving either; on their sterns I could make out sailors frenziedly swinging axes on the heavy manila hawsers going over their gunwales, hacking the cables in half. One look abeam showed why clearly enough.

Evenly, majestically, the vast bulk of the *Strathallan* was rolling over on its port side. Already her port rail was under water, the side there with all its melted airports was submerged and no longer visible. There was flame enough still spouting high to furnish more illumination than seemed needful, but nothing like what had been. I wondered perhaps if the sea already half filling her had not engulfed her firerooms and so drowned out the worst of that inferno.

The terrific list was too much for her top hamper. The foremast leaned crazily over and collapsed into the forward well deck which was now almost vertical, a glowing mass of white-hot steel. First one stack, then the other, tore loose and skidded down the steeply sloping boat deck into the sea. Relentlessly she continued to capsize, the sea lapped higher on her fiery decks, clouds of steam rose up from the waves as they hit the sizzling steel, to mingle with the smoke above.

Farther and farther over she went; the dazzling glow from her incandescent topsides, from the flames, and from the lurid clouds of smoke and steam above began sharply to decrease, then suddenly was wholly extinguished like a snuffed candle. It was night again,

completely dark both near and far.

The *Strathallan* had sunk.

Only a huge cloud of black smoke, scarcely distinguishable from the black sky overhead as it rose slowly clear of the surface, marked the spot from which a moment before that splendid vessel had started for the bottom, one thousand fathoms down, twenty miles still to Oran. Slowly the smoke lifted higher, leaving only the undisturbed sea, no different there than anywhere under the night skies.

With wet eyes, and not from smoke either, I stared sadly at that spot. The *Strathallan* was gone after all our efforts. We had done our best.

But we had failed.

24

By 8:30 A.M., DECEMBER 22, 1942,

the *King Salvador* was back in her berth in Oran alongside the salvage quay, practically a dead ship once she was tied up, with all hands except one man on deck and two men below turned in. I prayed that nothing more got torpedoed immediately in our area; we were in no condition just then to tackle another wreck at sea.

Completely washed up myself, I crawled ashore, reported briefly by telephone to the Flag-Officer-in-Charge, Oran, that we had failed to save the *Strathallan*, asked him to relay that to Admiral Cunningham, and made my way back to my room at the Grand Hotel. There, too stiff and weary for anything else, I flung myself out on the bed, trying to forget the nightmare I had just been through.

Next morning I was on my way by air to Algiers, to report to Admiral Cunningham and to try to put some dynamite under a salvage problem there that was making no progress at all and which the Naval Commander-in-Chief's office was urging I look into personally.

In Algiers we had a large Cunarder, the 20,000 ton *Scythia*, which had come in some weeks before with a huge hole blasted in the starboard side of her number two hold forward. Like the *Strathallan*, she had caught a U-boat torpedo while laden with troops steaming in convoy through the Mediterranean on her way to Algiers. Fortunately, unlike the *Strathallan*, her machinery spaces had escaped damage, and though as badly flooded, and considerably down by the head besides from the waterlogged hold forward, she had made Algiers under her own power and discharged all her troops and all her cargo, save that in the flooded hold. Since then

she had been lying motionless in Algiers harbor, by far the biggest vessel in the port, an alluring target for Nazi bombs, and sure, if she stayed long enough, to catch some which would finish her off in one of the almost nightly raids being staged on the harbor.

The *Scythia* had to get out of there. Algiers was too hot a spot for her to remain long, injured or uninjured. But nothing could be done to repair her in Algiers. The largest dry dock in the port, a graving dock built of stone, not a floating dry dock, could at most take in the 6000 to 8000 ton bulk of freighters like Liberty ships. The 20,000 ton *Scythia*, with a vast hole in her starboard side, was hopelessly oversize for that dry dock. And not only for the dry dock in Algiers but for any elsewhere in all North Africa—except for that 25,000 ton Grand Dock lying on the bottom of the sea in Oran, the one which I had Bill Reed and some Frenchmen trying to pull up exactly for cases of her sort.

But the *Scythia* wasn't getting out of there in spite of the obvious fact that if she didn't soon, any morning now there might not be enough *Scythia* left ever to get out. That was what had Admiral Cunningham and all his staff as far up in the air as stolid Englishmen ever get. For the poor *Scythia* was more firmly held by red tape and ancient maritime custom to the quay alongside which she lay in Algiers than she was by her mooring cables.

The *Scythia* was a merchant ship, a sizable transatlantic passenger liner with a merchant crew and under merchant rules. War or no war, those rules were as inflexible and unchangeable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. Lloyd's agents in Algiers, standing on the rules, wouldn't let her go to sea—she wasn't seaworthy so much down by the bow and with that tremendous hole in her side; anybody could see that with half an eye; they wouldn't issue a certificate of seaworthiness. The *Scythia*'s merchant captain, standing on the rules, wouldn't take his ship to sea without the required certificate of seaworthiness from Lloyd's, which he couldn't get. If he did so and she foundered on him for any reason at all, the British Board of Trade, also standing firmly on those rules, would strip him of his master's ticket; they'd lift it anyway, even if she didn't founder, just for his sailing without that certificate. He wouldn't do it.

So the *Scythia* remained tied up to the quay in a port everyone

freely recognized as extremely hazardous; five smaller ships already had been destroyed there. That she would ultimately fall a victim to Axis bombs was highly probable, but break those ancient rules to save her? It was not to be thought of. If the bombs got her, that would be altogether according to Hoyle—she could go up in smoke or go down with more holes blasted in her hull and everyone's face would still be saved—except the *Scythia's*.

Admiral Cunningham was tearing his hair over that impasse. He couldn't order Lloyd's or its civilian agents to do anything; he had no authority at all over them. And he couldn't order the *Scythia's* merchant captain to take her to sea to a safer port westward, either; he could issue the order, all right, but the order just wouldn't be obeyed, and nowhere could the Naval Commander-in-Chief lay hands in his scant forces on the necessary naval officers and men to man the *Scythia* and sail her to safety.

In Admiral Cunningham's office at the St. George the moment I stepped into it the morning of December 23, that problem was put up to me. What, as Principal Salvage Officer, could I do, and hurriedly, to the *Scythia* that would persuade Lloyd's agents to issue a certificate, any kind of a certificate no matter how shot full of holes, on which she might be sailed to Oran by her own crew? Her master, I was assured, wasn't afraid of the danger at sea; he was simply afraid of the Board of Trade and of his ticket; he was perfectly willing to sail the *Scythia* out on any kind of a certificate that wouldn't hazard his master's ticket—too much. What could I do about it? Here was a torpedoed ship foundering in an ocean of red tape as inexorably as had the *Strathallan* in an ocean of water. I was a salvage man; saving torpedoed vessels was my business.

I smiled wryly. After all, I reflected, I had just failed to save the *Strathallan*, a bigger ship. Why should more be expected with the *Scythia*? But, I supposed, I was a last straw at which they were clutching. So I said I'd go down to the wharves and look the situation over, though inwardly I felt hopeless about it. I had had experience enough already with American red tape, even in wartime, to take the guts out of anybody; as for the British variety, it had had opportunity down the centuries to age to a tenacity which made our brand only of gossamer flimsiness. I'd sooner fight the

sea any time for a ship; against the sea, sometimes you could win.

Down on the Algiers waterfront again, I was soon aboard the *Scythia*, threading its endless corridors on my way forward and below to the flooded hold. With me were the *Scythia*'s First Officer, her Chief Engineer, Lloyd's surveyor for the port, and the senior of the two Royal Navy lieutenants who were my salvage assistants in Algiers.

We got to the lower deck in the number two hold, the lowest deck still above water. That deck and all those above had been troop spaces, filled with metal bunks, tiered four high, in which the soldiers slept on the voyage. The metal-stanchioned tiers of bunks had already all been cleared out of there, leaving a large rectangular open 'tween decks space, about seventy-five feet athwartships, about the same length fore and aft, and about nine feet high. There must have been some 600 Tommies (she happened to be carrying British troops when struck) berthed in that compartment the night the torpedo exploded just below them.

I looked at the deck on which I was standing, which formed the top of the actual cargo hold below. There was a large cargo hatch, about twenty feet square, framed by a heavy steel coaming, in the middle of it. The steel deck beneath my feet was bulged up badly, with a number of small shrapnel holes in it to starboard. The wooden hatch covers were all missing—you could look right down on the sea flooding in practically to the under side of that lower deck. And through the water you could see the glow of light coming from the sea outside through the hole the torpedo had blasted, where the starboard side wasn't any more.

Those wooden hatch covers must have lifted like an elevator when the torpedo let go below them, thus venting the explosion into that troop compartment and saving the entire lower deck from tearing away altogether instead of merely bulging badly upward. But I hated to think what had happened to the tiers and tiers of Tommies sleeping over those hatch covers when they suddenly shot upward in a burst of flame from half a ton of TNT, let alone to all the other Tommies in that compartment even clear of the hatches. I didn't ask the *Scythia*'s First Officer at my side what had happened to the Tommies; it was obvious enough without discuss-

sion. Instead, I turned to, studying the physical damage to the *Scythia* herself and what, if anything, might be done with our negligible salvage forces and equipment in Algiers to get her a certificate.

One look into the open cargo hatch and I washed out any thought I might have had about temporarily patching the side. That hole was at least sixty feet long fore and aft; probably it was over twenty-five feet deep. It would take months, and divers I didn't have anyway, to put even a temporary patch over that hole so we could pump out the flooded hold. If ever the *Scythia* moved out of Algiers again, she was going to have to move with that hold flooded and her side as wide open to the sea as it was then. But since Lloyd's wouldn't give her a certificate in that condition, it all looked hopeless, not even worth arguing about with the surveyor. If I couldn't produce some very tangible improvement in the *Scythia* which would at least save everybody's face even if it really didn't make much difference in the ship, there certainly wasn't going to be any certificate.

I took out my pocket slide rule and started to figure diligently. (A slide rule always impresses, giving to the bystanders a feeling that the user thereof knows what he's about and will shortly come up with the answer.) However, I was actually trying to get an answer to something which was peculiar. To me, the *Scythia* was considerably more down by the head, and consequently so much less seaworthy, than just one flooded hold should put her. Was it so? I pushed my slide rule back and forth, computing volumes, weights, displacement, trimming moments, and what trim by the head should result.

It was so. When I finished pushing my slide rule around, it appeared that the *Scythia* certainly *was* more down by the head than the flooded hold before me should put her. I asked her First Officer what might be wrong with her that I could not see.

He told me. Though there was no very visible sign of it, his number three lower hold, which was composed of deep tanks intended for liquid cargo only, was also flooded up to the very tops of the deep tanks. And that, in spite of the fact that the hole in the starboard side didn't extend aft enough to rupture that hold.

So we all climbed up several decks, went a little aft, and then came down the ladders in the number three hold to finish up on the solid steel deck which formed the top of the deep tanks for liquid cargo. The rather large bolted down square manhole covers were slightly bulged up and leaking a bit here and there, but not much. They must be under moderate pressure from the sea below now pressing upward on them, trying to rise higher.

My eyes lighted up when they fell on those flooded deep tanks—here was just what the doctor ordered to save the patient. It was in the bag now; with those deep tanks I'd have no trouble at all wrangling from Lloyd's the all-important certificate, regardless of the huge hole left wide open in her side!

Out came my slide rule again. I did some more hasty computing. It came out that there must be at least 2300 tons of sea water now in those deep tanks, a whole lot of sea water. I could imagine how it had got in—there must be some shrapnel holes punched by fragments of the exploding torpedo in the steel bulkhead between the deep tanks and the flooded number two hold. But those shrapnel holes couldn't be large and they couldn't be many, and I could cope with them. Those holes high up near the top of the bulkhead, I could get to with a diver on the forward side and plug off; those lower down which a diver couldn't get to because of the submerged cargo left in the number two hold, wouldn't cause me any great trouble; as a matter of fact, they'd be a help.

For the answer was compressed air—in my life, the answer to nearly everything that couldn't easily be solved otherwise. I'd make a diving bell out of those deep tanks. All that was necessary (after I'd plugged those upper shrapnel holes, using a British diver) was to get a few air compressors aboard the *Scythia*. With those, I could push most of the water in the deep tanks out through the unplugged shrapnel holes closer to the bottom and get rid of most of that unwelcome load of 2300 tons of sea water in the number three lower hold.

That would bring her bow up out of the sea at least five or six feet; by shifting other loads I was sure we could lift her bow a total of eight feet at least and the whole ship between two and three feet higher out of water. She would then visibly be in fine condi-

tion to go to sea. Her bow would be high out of water, her draft about normal for full load. All you would have to do was to imagine that that sea water still in the flooded number two hold was just liquid cargo you were carrying there instead of in the regular deep tanks just aft them. That wouldn't be difficult for anyone to imagine, once he got a little used to the idea.

Assured in my own mind of all that, I sprang it on the Lloyd's surveyor and on the *Scythia's* officers. It was all right with the Chief Engineer; the First Officer was certain it would be all right with his captain. But the surveyor was dubious; he granted that I could put the ship in the condition I stated and make her really seaworthy for a short voyage, but even for a short voyage, would she stay that way? For instance, the compressed air would put a heavy pressure on the flat tank tops which they had never been built to stand; already I could see that the rectangular manhole covers were bulging upward under a very low pressure. With all the pressure I was going to put on them, the tank tops themselves were likely to rupture suddenly at sea and release all the air. And even if they didn't, suppose they only leaked somewhat on the voyage and lost the precious compressed air I'd put in 'em? What then? In either case, the sea would refill those deep tanks, and the ship at sea would find herself down by the head again, just as unseaworthy as she was then. How about all that?

Inwardly I began to feel better; now the surveyor was arguing with me about details, it was all right. I didn't open on the surveyor with any counters to his objections. Instead I tried another tack.

"If I convince you to your own satisfaction on the points you've raised, will you issue the certificate?" I asked of him.

The surveyor reflected on that; it seemed fair enough. They were his own objections under consideration; he alone was to be the judge. And after all, he was no more anxious to sacrifice the *Scythia* than anybody else; he just had rules to meet and he needed colorable reason to show at Lloyd's in London he'd met them should anything go wrong.

"W-w-e-l-l, y-y-e-s," he answered finally, reluctantly dragging out the words. "But only a strictly limited certificate, mind; only for the

trip to the nearest safe port, Oran, and only for a good weather passage, well convoyed, and only in case she keeps within five miles o' shore, so she can be beached if need be. Now what's your proposal on my objections? I'm a hard man, mind y'."

I could have cheered. I was glad he thought of himself as a hard man. Once a hard man makes a decision, he sticks by it; there's no more dilly-dallying. I didn't mind; the certificate was as good as in the skipper's hands; the *Scythia* could sail! His limitations were all reasonable enough and easily met.

"Well, I want you to be wholly satisfied. First, I'll get a lot of Royal Engineer carpenters aboard and we'll shore down with heavy shores these tank tops and the after bulkhead to stand the greatest pressure they can possibly get. Then as soon as my diver's plugged the holes, we'll put on the air pressure. You can watch; if the deck bulges anywhere we'll put in more shores—just as many as you say and no argument. That'll take care o' strength.

"Now for the leaks. I'll not only put the air compressors aboard to push the water out of these deep tanks, but leave 'em aboard the *Scythia* for the whole voyage to Oran, as well as good men to tend 'em night and day and watch the pressure gauges to make good any leakage. And if there's anything else, you say so and I'll do that too!"

He was satisfied; there wasn't anything else he could think of. All I had to do was to put the *Scythia* in the condition I'd promised and let him witness the tests and inspect to see it was so; I could then rely on him to issue the certificate, limited as he'd stated, so the ship could sail. I shook his hand gratefully; had he been French instead of English, I should also have kissed him on both cheeks.

The Lloyd's surveyor left, together with the ship's officers. I turned to right there with my British salvage lieutenant, outlining to him carefully what he was to do and how he was to do it. I couldn't stay in Algiers long enough to see it through myself. The job would take perhaps four or five days; in two days I should be back in Oran; it would be wholly in that young lieutenant's hands. But he was a good youngster. He'd do it.

So shortly saying goodby to him also, not to see either him or the *Scythia* again that visit, I started up the hill once more to re-

port to Admiral Cunningham that within a week the *Scythia* would sail, perhaps sooner. I felt better. Never before, with only a slide rule, a few well-chosen words, and in only a few hours, had I had the luck to salvage even a rowboat, let alone a torpedoed 20,000-tonner.

A week after that discussion, the wounded *Scythia* steamed safely into Oran, there to moor in the outer harbor near the *Ardois* and await two things—the removal of the *Spahi* so she could get into the inner harbor and the raising of the Grand Dock so she could be repaired.

C H A P T E R

25

I HAD NOTHING OF THE AFTERNOON

left after the ensuing session with the Admiral and his aides. But I had come back to the St. George at an auspicious moment; aside from the good news I bore regarding the *Scythia*, Admiral Cunningham had just received word that His Majesty, the King, George the Sixth, by the Grace of God, etc., had thought fit to nominate and appoint him Admiral of the Fleet, the very highest rank in the Royal Navy. He was equivalent now to a five-star admiral (four-star was the highest rank we then had in our own Navy) and to a Field Marshal in the British Army.

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Browne Cunningham, G.C.B., R.N., naturally enough was all smiles over his new honor, though also naturally enough, he made no personal mention of it. Its major effect for him, aside from the honor, would be that he must now rake up from somewhere the needful gold lace to add another stripe to those already covering each of his threadbare sleeves; whether they could be added (assuming he could find some in Algiers) without running up over his elbows, was going to be a tough problem. But if I knew Cunningham (and by now I thought I did) he would have been considerably more gratified if His Majesty had been able to bestow on him instead of the promotion a few scores of capable divers, four or five decent salvage ships, and a warehouse full of salvage equipment, to cope with all the wrecks already in sight, let alone those sure to come.

But if the new Admiral of the Fleet had nothing himself to say on the matter of his promotion, his staff had plenty to say in the way of rejoicing, and I heartily agreed with them. No man in any

Allied service, land, air, or sea, had more richly earned his rank. I added my congratulations to those of his British staff before we got down to other business, mostly headaches.

There was the *U.S.S. Thomas Stone*, a fine new American naval armed transport, first torpedoed, then bombed, and now hard and fast aground in Algiers' outer harbor. What could be done about her? Because she was a regular naval vessel of the United States Navy, Cunningham was particularly anxious she get attention. I had to say, nothing yet; she must lie as she was unless I pulled everything I had in Oran, including the *King Salvor*, out of there. Since that obviously was not in order, she must lie untouched till at least we cleared the *Spahi* from the entrance to Oran. All right; scratch the *U.S.S. Thomas Stone* off for the present. Commodore Dick, Chief of Staff, accordingly scratched her off.

How about the *Spahi*; when would she be clear, to open up Oran harbor? I explained the sad story of the *Spahi*; possibly in two more weeks, I hoped. Cunningham smiled grimly, made some notes of his own, told me we should have no further troubles over the *Spahi* other than strictly salvage ones.

The Grand Dock? Without the Grand Dock, we might as well let the *Scythia* and any more big ones like her burn, sink, or blow up—they were all otherwise total losses the minute they were damaged. I had to answer I didn't know too much about the Grand Dock yet to be certain; a month more and some luck and I hoped to have her on the surface.

Then there was the Moyen Dock in Oran; that sunken U-boat off Tenes to be searched; the *Strasbourg* in Algiers; the *Glenfinlas* in Bougie; the *Aurora* in Philippeville; the *Cameronia*, the *Ithuriel*, the *Novelist*, the *Recorder*, and the *Meriel* in Bône. They were all salvageable, all badly needed, especially the big *Cameronia*, all shrieking for immediate attention, not to mention several score more of other wrecks in all the ports up and down the whole coast which were more difficult problems. How about all of them? I had to shake my head sadly. I would give the *Cameronia*, the biggest of the lot, some thought; something might be done to get her out of Bône. As for all the others, it was not worth my while yet even to go and look at them; there was nothing with which to work on

any of them. For every solitary diver I had, there were at least half a dozen wrecks already. If I dissipated my slight force trying to cover more, I'd never get anything accomplished.

Admiral of the Fleet Cunningham nodded in agreement, commended me for the *Porcupine*, extended his commiserations over the *Strathallan*, congratulated me on the *Scythia*. Then he assured me that both he and General Eisenhower (who was personally following very closely events at sea though just then he was on the Tunisian fighting front) felt that salvage was going pretty well. He would himself give more thought to the difficulties my salvage forces and I were staggering under. Perhaps he could find a way to ameliorate them a bit, particularly any more situations such as had arisen with the *Laforey* over the salvage of the *Strathallan*. The discussion ended. I left. Already it was dark outside.

I had dinner at the Aletti with Rear Admiral Murray, R.N., Fleet Engineer, and Captain King, R.N., Fleet Constructor, both of Cunningham's staff. Murray, an engineer rear admiral, and King, a naval constructor captain, were in charge of all repair work on damaged ships, once they had been dragged into port. They had both returned only the day before from Oran, where they had gone to examine *H.M.S. Porcupine*, out of water on the Petit Dock.

The *Porcupine* had shocked them. They had gone to Oran (where of course they knew she couldn't really be repaired) with the idea simply of having heavy steel girders welded temporarily along her torpedoed port side over the hole in her engine room, so she could hold together during the long tow back to England to be refitted. But once they saw all of her out of water, they hadn't found enough of the *Porcupine* left intact to give them anything to start from. How she had ever held together, waterlogged and in a sea-way, long enough to get her into Arzeu, they couldn't imagine. So their decision had been, instead of trying to tie the *Porcupine* together, to finish cutting her completely in half as she lay on the dry dock, not much of a job; carefully seal up all leaks in the bulkheads at the after end of the bow half and at the forward end of the stern half, shore up those bulkheads, and take her off the dry dock in two pieces. That was being done. When the unjointed bow and stern, both watertight and both absolutely light, came off

the Petit Dock, they would then be towed back to England separately (the stern half, of course, stern first) where the *Porcupine* would be fitted together once more, a new port engine installed, and she would once again be a fighting ship. A most peculiar case, that *Porcupine*, they both agreed. She would, they felt, become a seagoing legend like the *Flying Dutchman*.

Dinner over, I started upstairs to wander through the Aletti, seeing whether, for a change, I might come across some civilians, press correspondents recently from home, who might give me some off the record and authentic (and undoctored-up for morale purposes) news of what actually was going on along the home front. The war correspondents were all billeted at the Aletti.

I finished up in the room assigned to the representative for *Time*. We had a drink. He thought things on the war front were lousy; every decent story you couldn't send home; the enemy had to be kept in the dark. That *Strathallan* story, for instance; it had just come bursting in. Algiers was full of thousands of survivors who had just been brought in special trains from Oran; you could pick up personal experience stories by the hundreds—all wonderful. But he wasn't bothering even to listen to any; as a newspaper man, they merely gave him stomach ulcers because not a word could he wire home, not even the bare fact that a huge transport had been torpedoed although garnished with the good news that our troops aboard had mostly, or perhaps all, been saved. The enemy must be kept in the dark that they had successfully torpedoed a big transport.

I had to laugh. When I thought of how the *Strathallan* had lighted up the night skies over the Mediterranean like Vesuvius in eruption, we certainly were keeping the enemy in the dark all right. Even the fish knew all about it; nobody could possibly now be in the dark regarding the *Strathallan* save the people back home.

But to hell with the war front, I told him. How about the home front—how were things really in the United States which I hadn't seen since right after we got kicked into the war?

They were bad there too, I learned. If I thought all Americans were wholeheartedly exerting themselves in the war effort, I had another think coming. Plenty saw the war only as a chance to put

on a squeeze. For instance, on the very day the newspapers were announcing in flaring headlines on the front page the final surrender at Bataan of the pathetic remnants of Wainwright's starving, fever-ridden, and bleeding G.I.s who had been fighting for months night and day, finally could fight no longer, on an inside page they were carrying another story that would drive any fighting man to the thought of murder. At General Motors, wholly given over to turning out fighting equipment, the workmen, already getting much higher pay than ever before and time and a half for overtime, had presented an ultimatum. They demanded shorter hours and *double* time for work on Sundays or they were all walking off the job and no discussion about it!

Then, aside from that, everything at home was tightly rationed—for Americans a bitter pill to swallow. Worst of all, we'd lost so many tankers to U-boat torpedoes off our own coasts, people with oil burners couldn't get fuel oil enough on their drastically curtailed rations to keep themselves safely warm, nor could they convert back to coal. I gnashed my teeth over that one. Gasoline rationing I didn't mind. But my house had an oil burner, and worse yet, a rather old one; that ancient burner ordinarily consumed oceans of oil to keep our house reasonably warm. On tightly rationed oil, my wife must be freezing!

With that, I thanked my informant for all his news but told him he could stop. I'd rather discuss the war instead; it was less distressing to me. So we got back to the war front again.

There was a big push on the Tunisian front going to break any day now; all the correspondents knew all about it. Once it broke, they'd have a story at last the censors would let them wire home. Eisenhower himself had left Algiers for the front. He was going to push through in one big smash, seize all Tunisia, and end everything by New Year's Day before Rommel and his Afrika Korps, falling rapidly back through Tripolitania, could possibly arrive to join forces with von Arnim and bolster up Bizerte and Tunis.

At that point, without any knock, the door of that Aletti room flew back. I glanced up momentarily; into the skimpily lighted room walked two air force captains, looking for a drink, most likely. I started to ignore them; I was off everybody in the air force, from

colonels on down. But something about one of them, in spite of the dim light, caught my eye. Even for an air force officer, that one was unusual. I looked again.

Well, I'll be damned, I thought! The air force has put over another one on us in making itself even more attractive—they've got women flyers in the war zone now! For before me, in cap, tunic, trousers and service shoes, complete with wings, service ribbons, and combat stars, stood an air force captain, a woman! And a good-looking one, too, I had to admit.

Staring open-mouthed at her, I got another jolt. Why, I knew her; she was Margaret Bourke-White! We'd met several times before the war in New York. She was no flyer; she was a press photographer, maybe a press correspondent also. What in hell was *she* doing in that air force uniform?

She recognized me also and began to laugh at my very evident bewildered stare.

"Don't worry, Captain, they haven't got down yet to relying on *me* to scare the enemy with bombs instead of flash bulbs! I'm just a forlorn survivor off the *Strathallan*—that's the why of these clothes! But I do look nice in 'em; don't you think so?"

I had to concede that. The other air force captain, the real one, was introduced. We all had another drink at *Time's* expense; then she explained. Pieced out with much that I learned later from other survivors, this was what had happened.

Margaret Bourke-White had been on her way from London to the Tunisian front to cover the impending offensive as press correspondent and photographer for *Life*; they'd put her on the *Strathallan* along with nearly two hundred American army nurses, as well as all those G.I.s.

Then had come the big moment in her life as a press photographer—she was on a gigantic troopship loaded with troops when it was torpedoed! Instantly the torpedo exploded (and she found herself still completely intact) she seized her camera and her flash bulbs, and not waiting for anything else, rushed out on deck in her negligee to get the pictures that would make press history!

Then had begun complete frustration. It was 2 A.M., it was completely dark, the ship was, of course, blacked out. She couldn't get

a picture of the tumult on the crowded decks, of the frenzied G.I.s swarming up from the crowded holds below, of the crew frantically struggling to swing out the lifeboats, of anything at all—without exploding a flash bulb to illuminate the scene for her picture! For she realized that if she pressed the button for even one picture, she would illuminate as by a flare for the U-boat captain who was undoubtedly still staring through his periscope at them to discover the results of his shot. And undoubtedly also, she'd instantly be pitched over the side, camera and all, by the crazed men all about her whom she'd exposed by that flash to the danger of an immediate second torpedo, maybe more!

She didn't take any pictures; she wept instead over the lost opportunity. She was on the boat deck, the best spot to get pictures, but there weren't going to be any. Shivering there in the darkness, it came to her she had next to nothing on; she started back for her stateroom in the superstructure below her to get some clothes. She hadn't a chance.

The ship was listing slowly to port, the lifeboats were being loaded, already from forward of where she stood, they were being lowered away. Against the masses of G.I.s who had abandon ship stations in those lifeboats, all of whom (plus plenty more who had no boat assignments) were flowing up on the boat deck, there wasn't a chance in the world to go counter-current. So willy-nilly, still clutching her precious camera, clad only in her negligee, she struggled toward the boat to which she had been assigned.

That boat happened to be on the port side, about amidships. Her boat and the one just abaft it were the abandon ship stations for all the women nurses aboard and for a few surgeons also belonging to their hospital unit. Amidst the shouts and cries of men and women on the jammed and listing boat deck trying to find their boats in the utter darkness and the confusion, she fought through finally to hers.

She made the rail on the port side abreast her boat. She was late for the boat, most of those in its assigned load were there before her. But confusion there (and on the next boat astern) was, if possible, worse than anywhere. Most of the passengers were huddled just inboard of the gunwale, refusing to get into the boat, pleading

with the few sailors manning it and the davits to do something.

She swiftly found out why. Her boat was full of water up to the thwarts! The boat astern was even worse. With some sixty to eighty people loaded into each of them, they were likely to sink the moment they hit the sea; they would certainly go awash to their gunwales, swiftly then to swamp with the first wave that washed over them. Apparently the exploding torpedo, hitting the engine room directly below, had shot an immense geyser of water into the air; coming down, it had practically filled those two lifeboats as they lay in their chocks on the open boat deck.

All around her, nurses and doctors, whom she couldn't see except as vague shadows in the night, were pleading with the ship's officers loading the boats, even with the few sailors in them and at the lowering lines, for God's sake to do something about all the water in those two boats before they lowered them.

They got nowhere. Amidst cries from all around that the ship was sinking and gruff orders to quit bellyaching and get in or the boats would go without them, they were pushed into the water-logged boats. She and all those with her, mostly women, found themselves jammed amongst the thwarts, packed so tightly they could hardly move, in cold water over their hips. The boatfalls started to whine, the boatblocks over their heads began to groan. In the blackness, that already flooded and overloaded boat, swaying drunkenly as the boatfalls ran out, dropped swiftly down the towering side of the ship toward the black sea far below, with the boat astern of them starting down just after them.

They hit the sea; as expected, they nearly submerged immediately. A prayer of thankfulness went up from the passengers; there remained, thank God, an inch or two of freeboard at their gunwales! While the seamen at bow and stern, badly hampered by lack of elbow room in which to move, strove to cast loose the massive disengaging blocks and get free of the boatfalls, off the heads of every woman and the few men in that boat came their tin hats. Those who could somehow bend over enough to reach down, started frantically to bail the boat with those tin hats to help gain freeboard.

Their prayers of thankfulness almost immediately turned to

curses and shrieks, even from the women. Down into their boat, almost at the point of foundering anyway, came from overhead a solid stream of water, almost like a hose stream, to add to their peril. Looking up, even in the darkness they could see it was shooting down on them from the bottom of the next boat aft, beneath which they had drifted the moment their boatfalls had slacked a little. Someone had knocked the plug out of the bottom of that boat, already halfway down the ship's side, trying to drain it out before it hit the sea!

From far over their heads, they could hear agonized feminine shrieks from that boat, crying to the sailors on the boat deck of the *Strathallan* above them to quit lowering, for the love of God to hold the boat there till it drained out and they had the plug back in!

In their own boat, the sailors got the blocks disengaged, pushed frenziedly off with boathooks to get clear of the ship's side before either they swamped from the water coming down or the other boat dropped on them. They came free, drifted away in the darkness.

Still looking up horror-stricken, they could see the lifeboat abaft them, water still pouring down in a heavy jet from the open hole in its bottom, inexorably being lowered toward the sea. The sailors on the boat deck above either had not heard or had paid no attention to those piercing screams to hold that boat! Then everything faded wholly from their view in the dark night and they were alone on the heaving ocean, bailing madly as best they could with their tin hats to try to gain a little freeboard before a real wave hit them and they swamped.

But if they could see nothing at all, they could hear plenty. Aside from the wild uproar coming across the water to them from the listing *Strathallan*, somewhere in the blackness not so far away they began to catch the heartrending shrieks and piercing screams of drowning women, mingling with the agonized groans of a few dying men, all strangling and freezing in spite of life preservers in the cold seas breaking over them. For the lifeboat astern of them, lowered without a stop with its drain plug still out (it had been impossible for anyone in that flooded and jammed boat ever to replace it), had been pushed clear only to drift off into the night, fill

completely, and swamp.

There was nothing they could do about it save listen and shout to make their own whereabouts known. So packed was their boat that no one could get out any oars to go to the rescue, let alone swing them if ever they got them out. Gradually the screams of the drowning nurses died away and they were left at last in silence as well as in darkness to bail their own boat. It was more necessary now than ever; clinging to the gunwales of that waterlogged boat were perhaps half a dozen women and a man or two; strong swimmers who guided by cries in the night had managed to get to the side of their boat. But they couldn't be taken aboard yet; first, there was no room for a single added passenger, and second, till the boat was bailed completely, any extra load would swamp it altogether.

So those hanging to the gunwales over the side had to stay there in the darkness, trying to strike a hairline balance between keeping enough out of water not to drown and keeping as much as possible submerged so as not to sink the last straw between themselves and quick death for everybody.

Finally, after an anguished eternity in that precarious position, what water could be reached by those inside was all bailed out, a few more inches was added to the freeboard. One by one, the exhausted hangers-on were cautiously dragged over the side, somehow packed in with the others. Motionless then, wet, cold, and heart-broken for the friends they had lost, those in the boat, mostly nurses, waited in the darkness for the dawn.

Day came at last. They looked about them. From their low position, their horizon extended only a few miles. Here and there, not so far away, drifted the other boats, all jammed as full as theirs. The *Strathallan* was no longer anywhere in sight; they could only conclude she must have sunk. Nobody commented. Helpless to help themselves, they drifted forlornly over the empty ocean. In some of the boats, all loaded with G.I.s, a pair of oars was somehow got out and some very awkward rowing attempted to get closer to the others; possibly by propinquity to lessen the general misery. Hours more passed.

Along about noon, two destroyers showed up on the southern

horizon, guided to them perhaps by radar. Shortly the destroyers were among them, one after another emptying the jammed boats till finally all were rescued; then the destroyers headed directly for Oran. Those must have been the first two destroyers I'd seen returning; only the other three, then, could have gone directly to the *Strathallan* to take off the mass of troops still on her.

As for Margaret Bourke-White, some surgeon in her boat had loaned her his coat to keep her from freezing to death; when dawn came, she had got a few pictures of the other boats. They would be worthless she thought; packed in as she was, it had been impossible to get decent camera angles or composition. Anyway, it didn't matter much. The censors wouldn't let her use them for months yet and even then the ship's name and the location and what finally had happened to that troopship would all be suppressed. Everything about the *Strathallan* was strictly hush-hush, including the fifty American nurses, more or less, who had been pushed over the side in an obviously unseaworthy boat to perish in the sea. They, most of all, were strictly hush-hush.

As regards the air force uniform she was wearing, when she got to Algiers one of the surviving nurses had drummed up this captain who was about her height; he had loaned her a spare uniform till she could get some women's clothes somewhere in Algiers.

And that was everything.

And that *was* everything about the *Strathallan* and her passengers. It was many a long week before, either day or night even amongst the newer and fresher horrors of the war on sea and land, the *Strathallan*, though a thousand fathoms deep beneath the sea, quit haunting my thoughts, waking or sleeping.

C H A P T E R

26

NEXT MORNING WAS THE DAY BEFORE Christmas, my first in the war zone.

I started early up the hill to G.H.Q. at the St. George. Christmas morning I was returning to Oran; I should have much to cover on this day in Algiers. I had lain awake most of the night, with vivid images of blasted ships, some I'd seen and more I hadn't yet, fighting each other for the undivided attention of what confused and worn-out senses I had left.

I had tried to concentrate on the *Cameronia*, that 16,000 ton transport just torpedoed off Bône. Admiral Cunningham, much against his own better judgment, had reluctantly consented to send her to Bône to carry almost up to the fighting line thousands of troops who could never get there in time overland, so that in the imminent offensive other thousands of G.I.s and Tommies should not be slaughtered for want of all possible reinforcements. The result had been what was almost certain. Off Bône the *Cameronia* had stopped a Nazi torpedo.

That torpedo had hit far aft, missing all the machinery spaces, to explode in and flood the after lower hold, not a large one. Fortunately the hit was not far enough aft to injure either rudder or propellers. The *Cameronia* had been able to limp the last few miles into Bône to discharge her troops and practically all their fighting equipment close up to the front lines where Eisenhower needed them.

So far as the army was concerned, the *Cameronia's* mission was accomplished. But so far as Admiral Cunningham was concerned, it looked as if he had expended a big 16,000 ton troopship in the

accomplishment. For staying in Bône even a few days (the normal turn around for a transport was in and out the same day and don't wait for darkness) was for a big ship equivalent to sure death from bombs. On the average, forty high explosive bombs came down every night on Bône harbor. And the *Cameronia*, so it was reported to Algiers, couldn't move out as she was.

With the *Cameronia*, it wasn't any case of seaworthiness or of certificates as it had been with the larger *Scythia*. The flooded hold aft wasn't large enough to affect her seaworthiness seriously in anybody's mind. The difficulty was that flying shrapnel from the exploding torpedo had pierced the steel bulkheads of the propeller shaft alley passing through that flooded after hold. As a result those holes had solidly flooded the shaft alley also. That had immersed completely in sea water the long propeller shafts going down that tunnel and had made it impossible for anyone to get in there to oil the numerous bearings carrying those massive steel shafts, as big around as a man's body.

And that was what was immobilizing the *Cameronia* in Bône. If she went to sea seeking safety, she would melt out all the babbitt metal in her unlubricated shaft bearings, freeze the shafts in the bearings, and unable to turn her propellers, become a helpless target for the first U-boat or the first flight of Axis bombers which discovered her. And there would not be much of an interval in that front line area before she would certainly be discovered by snooping planes and subjected to all the bombers which both near by Sicily and Bizerte could send out till she was finally sunk. That was the dilemma. Another night or two in Bône and she would be sunk there. And injured as she was, if she went to sea in that condition, she'd break down and even more surely be sunk.

Over that dilemma I had tossed sleeplessly all night long. Unless the salvage forces in Bône could do something for her swiftly, she was lost. But the negligible salvage forces in Bône couldn't possibly do anything for her in that short time available.

For poor Lieutenant Commander White, whom I'd sent to Bône, had no means whatever to patch up the big torpedo hole in the after hold and pump out both the hold and the shaft alley. That didn't even warrant discussion.

There was no solution. The salvage forces couldn't save her.

But nevertheless as I went up the hill toward the St. George, I wasn't particularly unhappy over the *Cameronia*. Assuming she had managed to survive the usual bombing of the night just passed, she wasn't lost. Nobody could do anything for her, but all that was necessary to get her to safety was to discard all orthodox thinking on what lubrication and lubricants were and what they weren't.

Shortly I was elaborating on that theme to Admiral of the Fleet Cunningham, to Rear Admiral Murray, his Fleet Engineer, and to others of his aides. It so happened it was a topic I could talk about with some authority. Aside from having been myself, along with various deck duties, a marine engineer in our Navy, after I had left the regular service I had been for nine years Chief Engineer for The Tide Water Oil Company. In that task, I had personally had a hand in making more barrels of fine lubricating oil than all the ships then in the Mediterranean, including the *Cameronia*, could possibly carry if all their holds were loaded with nothing but barrels of lubricating oil.

My point was peculiar for one who had always felt the best lubricant was none too good. Now I was urging that any liquid was in a sense a lubricant; the question at issue was only whether that liquid was reasonably satisfactory for the lubricating task in hand. We couldn't get oil to the shaft bearings on the *Cameronia*. Granted; let's forget the oil then and use instead sea water as a lubricant there. There was plenty of sea water available for the job—in fact, the apparent difficulty we faced was that we couldn't keep it out of those bearings if we tried. So let's all quit trying to do the impossible and make that sea water serve us. It would do the job if only we gave it a chance.

The bearings couldn't possibly get hot enough in that flooded shaft alley ever to melt or wipe out. There was now a whole ocean of cold sea water with access to those bearings submerging them to keep them cooled down. And the water would certainly get into the bearings continuously to give them that very necessary film of protection. It had behind it all the pressure of the sea rising high above those shafts, to force all the water which might get heated in the bearings from friction as the shafts turned and con-

stantly to replace that heated water with heavier and colder water right out of the sea.

Sea water didn't have as low a coefficient of friction as oil. Consequently, more heat would be generated in the bearings. But to offset that, there was a whole ocean of water (instead of only a few gallons of oil) to carry away the heat that *was* generated, and the extra power lost in turning ~~the~~ shafts we weren't worrying about. I wasn't recommending to His Majesty's Navy (or to the Anchor Line either) that they save money by quitting the use of expensive oil and flooding all their shaft alleys with sea water instead as a regular thing, but I was strongly recommending that nobody worry over doing it on the *Cameronia* for one 250 mile voyage from Bône to Algiers where she could in more safety stay the week required till British divers could take care of her there.

As for the *Cameronia*, heavily convoyed, of course, she ought to move at the slowest speed possible during her passage westward, not to press matters too far on her bearings. But if she were attacked either by planes or U-boats, as long as it was necessary to maneuver at full speed to avoid danger, she could go all out and I would stake my life those water-lubricated shaft bearings would stand up under it. The only sensible thing to do was to give the *Cameronia* a strong escort and order her immediately out of Bône, just as she was.

Admiral of the Fleet Cunningham, as willing as any man to try the unorthodox in a tight place, ordered exactly that. In a few days the *Cameronia* was safe in port far to the westward of Bône, having her shaft alley made watertight by divers. From there, running on oil again and able to make full speed all the way, she went back to England to have the torpedo hole repaired. Now, years later, the *Cameronia* still plows the ocean, none the worse for having demonstrated that when necessary to escape bombs, sea water (as long as there is plenty of it) makes a perfectly good lubricant.

That finished my discussion at Allied Naval Headquarters. As I left, I was invited to come back during the afternoon; the naval staff were having a sort of day ~~before~~ Christmas tea.

I dropped in on the next floor to see Jerry Wright again; Jerry, as liaison between Allied Force Headquarters and Washington,

always knew what was going on in both places.

Jerry wasn't particularly happy that morning over what he knew. Things in Washington might be as good as could be expected, but right there in Algeria, they weren't; as a matter of fact, they were terrible. That big Tunisian offensive, for which Eisenhower had strained every nerve and stripped the back areas, including Oran, of all soldiers possible to make them available on the fighting line and crush the enemy before he became too powerful; that offensive, for which Cunningham had just hazarded the *Cameronia*, which had been jammed full of those troops, to get them up to the line; that offensive, which was due to be launched that very morning, December 24, with high hopes of overrunning all Tunisia by New Year's Day, was already a complete fiasco—it wasn't even being launched.

For the word had come back two days before from General Anderson of the British Army, overall field commander, that everything was bogged down in the mud—planes, tanks, artillery, even such light equipment as dispatch rider's motorcycles, not to mention the poor infantrymen themselves who stuck helplessly in the mud simply trying to cross an open field. Orders or no orders, there could be no Allied offensive; nobody could possibly move forward on the Tunisian front.

Eisenhower realized that mud conditions could only get worse over the ensuing winter months, not better. If he delayed that offensive till spring came to dry the ground, it could result only in a junction of von Arnim's forces with those of Rommel and a build-up during the winter from near by Sicily of both those Axis armies so that by spring the military problem he would have to face would be infinitely worse. Instantly on hearing from Anderson, Eisenhower had himself departed posthaste from Algiers for the front, determined that if any man could even drag one mud-clogged foot after another, he should drag it and the offensive would be launched.

Word had just come in that Eisenhower had personally discovered that a man couldn't even lift his feet out of the Tunisian mud, let alone drag them along through it. On that day on which the big push to settle everything was to have been launched, Eisenhower

had been forced to cancel it indefinitely. There could be no offensive till spring.

God alone knew what would happen to us all by then in the face of the steady Axis build-up from Sicily and under a rain of Axis bombs from good all-weather Tunisian airfields while our own planes couldn't lift themselves out of the mud. As usual, it would, of course, be up to God and the Navy, British and American, to save the situation for the land and air forces. Meanwhile, the gloom at Allied Force Headquarters that day before Christmas among those who already had learned the sad news was so oppressive it was sickening.

C H A P T E R

27

WHILE JERRY WRIGHT AND I WERE glumly discussing this unhappy situation, in walked a classmate of Jerry's, Captain Olton Bennehoff, U.S.N., commanding officer of that *U.S.S. Thomas Stone* about which Admiral of the Fleet Cunningham had been so concerned the day before. Within ten seconds of the time Bennehoff's eyes lighted on me, I realized perfectly well why Cunningham had been so concerned—nobody, regardless of his rank, who was within reach was going to be allowed to remain unconcerned when Bennehoff's ship needed attention. Without even a ranging shot to see if he were on the target, Bennehoff promptly opened up on me with full salvos—I was Principal Salvage Officer for the Torch theater; if ever a ship in the Torch area needed (and was entitled to) the services of a salvage officer, his ship was it. What was I going to do about it?

Nothing—yet, I had to tell him. General Eisenhower had himself set the order of priority. If he could get General Eisenhower to put the new *U.S.S. Thomas Stone* ahead of an ancient French tub loaded with casks of wine and called the *Spahi*, it was all right with me. I'd turn to then with all hands on the *Thomas Stone* and let the *Spahi* go hang; otherwise not.

Well, when then would I get to the *Thomas Stone*? In a few weeks, I assured him; just as soon as I got the *Spahi* out of the entrance to Oran harbor and off my chest. I was personally as anxious as he was himself to see an important naval vessel like the *Thomas Stone* back helping to win the war; so was Admiral Cunningham, I knew. What more could he ask? His was the number two job.

Bennehoff, "Benny" ever since his Naval Academy days, was

stumped. His slight figure, wholly a bundle of nerves and iron resolution, vibrated dissent; for him, nothing took precedence over getting his ship swiftly back into the fight. But since for the moment at least, General Eisenhower wasn't within reach to be convinced of his mistake, Benny did the next best thing. There still was I. Would I take lunch with him aboard the *Thomas Stone*? She wasn't alongside any quay; she wasn't even in the harbor, really, but we could get there quickly. I'd need hardly more than a good pair of hip boots to get aboard her from the sandy beach on which she now lay stranded.

The invitation, I felt, was more a stratagem on Benny's part to get me where a sight of his necessities would overwhelm my better judgment and put me on his side for a joint assault on Eisenhower, rather than any real social courtesy, but I accepted. Sooner or later, I'd have to see the *Thomas Stone*; the lugubrious occasion might as well be now when it could be garnished with a decent meal which was unobtainable anywhere ashore. So saying good-by to Jerry Wright, both of us started down the steep hill in a staff car for Algiers Bay.

Shortly we were passing on our right the Palais d'Etat. It was quite a building, set back a little from the road and surrounded by a high iron picket fence. Before that fence, at the only gate and flanking each side of it, stood rigidly at "Attention" a pair of Spahi sentries, gorgeous in their gaily colored uniforms topped with flowing Arab turbans. That building was the seat of Darlan's government, as well as his personal residence. Considering the turbulent state of French opinion in North Africa, I thought those Spahi sentries right on Darlan's doorstep, with their wicked-looking bayoneted rifles, might well be necessary.

Finally we had dropped down the hill enough to turn eastward along the waterfront, leaving behind us to the westward the enclosed artificial harbor with all its jam of shipping. We skirted the empty beaches of Algiers Bay, a vast open crescent circling northeast toward Cape Matifou, some eight miles from the enclosed harbor.

About half way along the southern edge of this crescent, where the city of Algiers was beginning to thin out to open country, we

came to where lay the *U.S.S. Thomas Stone*, masked from our view from the road by the high oil tanks and buildings of a considerable bulk petroleum terminal belonging to Shell Oil. We left the car to thread our way on foot down to the beach along a narrow sandy alley between the walls protecting the oil tanks.

If Captain Bennehoff had anticipated that a sight of his distressed ship herself would make an impression, he was decidedly not disappointed.

Before me, rising abruptly on that beach almost out of the sand at my feet with no great stretch of water in between, was the towering bulk of the *Thomas Stone*. Not till eighteen months later on the Omaha Beach in Normandy, after an 80-mile hurricane which hit us a few days after D-day, was I ever to see a ship stranded so high and dry. There had been little exaggeration about our getting aboard her in hip boots; had Benny and I both been about as tall as Jerry Wright or, anyway, Giraud, we might just about have made her bow in wading suits. But inasmuch as we had neither hip boots nor wading suits, Benny simply sang out to his Officer of the Deck, easily within hearing distance, to send a boat in for the captain. Swimming out would have been much quicker.

In very few minutes we were climbing the high side ladder of the *Thomas Stone*, unusually high because she was so far out of water. In a few minutes more, I was seated in the cabin with Captain Bennehoff. The messboy began serving lunch; after that, I would inspect the ship herself.

The *Thomas Stone* saga I knew already from end to end from various other sources. An unkind Fate, more vindictive than the ancient Furies, had dealt the *Thomas Stone*, one after another, a series of deuces off the bottom of the deck. And the end was not yet.

The *U.S.S. Thomas Stone*, a new armed naval transport, had been specially designed for carrying assault troops and their landing craft, including tanks, close up to an enemy beachhead. She had been provided with special gear for getting the heavily loaded boats swiftly away on their mission. She had been heavily armed with naval guns, large and small, to smother opposing fire on the beaches

while ~~her~~ brood of ducklings swam in as the first assault wave. She had been destined for the Pacific to go to work on the Japs, with endless coral and palm-fringed island beachheads envisioned in her future.

Hardly had Captain Bennehoff finished the intensive training of his crew for that novel warfare and made ready to sail for the Pacific, than his ship was temporarily diverted to the Torch operation instead, where there would also be beaches to assault. On October 26, she had sailed from the Clyde in Scotland in a fast convoy loaded with British and American troops bound for Algiers, carrying herself 1400 troops of the 39th U.S. Infantry, intended as the first assault wave on the beaches just to the eastward of Algiers.

Heavily escorted by patrolling planes, cruisers, destroyers, and corvettes (all British), the *Thomas Stone* and her troop-laden convoy had negotiated the Atlantic part of the voyage successfully, so timed as to put them through the Straits of Gibraltar during the dark hours of the night of November 5-6. This was of particular importance; it was obvious that any news available to Spanish sources of their passage or composition would as instantly be received in Berlin and Rome as if we had radioed it in ourselves.

So far all still went well. Once through the Straits and into the widening Mediterranean, the convoy, strengthened now by battleship and aircraft carrier support, took the route normally used by ships bound for Axis-beleaguered Malta, trusting that any snooping Axis planes or periscopes would be deluded thereby as to their objective. They were, incidentally. Both Rome and Berlin believed the objective was either Malta or Sicily; North Africa never entered their minds. All that day and all night through they steamed onward for Malta; only at the last moment were they to turn abruptly southward to their real objective, Algiers.

Daylight came on November 7. They were off Cape Palos, Spain, about 600 miles beyond Gibraltar and with only 150 miles left to their assault positions off Algiers at H-hour, twenty hours yet. Against the dawn just breaking to the eastward over the Mediterranean the *Thomas Stone* stood beautifully outlined, the finest ship in the convoy. She paid for the distinction.

A torpedo wake was sighted to port, close aboard. Even before

the rudder could be put over to dodge, it struck, exploded with terrific violence aft, killed or wounded nine seamen, tore away the rudder and rudder post and the lower hull thereabouts, broke the propeller shaft, and left the *Thomas Stone* wholly helpless to move or to steer. The other transports steamed off with all the escorts, leaving their wounded sister alone to fight it out with that U-boat, with only *H.M.S. Spey*, a British corvette, remaining behind to lend what aid she could.

Bennehoff, a very pugnacious officer, was perfectly willing to fight it out with his hidden antagonist, though the latter now held all the trumps. He prepared to do so. But Benny had for the moment more important matters than that lurking U-boat on his mind—the only reason for the *Thomas Stone*'s being in the Mediterranean at all was to land 1400 assault troops at H-hour on the beaches east of Algiers, and by God, he was going to land them there!

Conventional tactics required him to launch his landing craft a mile or two off the beach a little before H-hour. Nothing he knew of prohibited him from launching his attack from 150 miles off the beach twenty hours before, so long as in either case the boats with their assault troops were on the beach at H-hour, or as soon thereafter as they could get there. Immediately, even while the convoy was fast disappearing to the eastward, leaving him as a sacrifice to hold the wolves, he began launching landing craft. The weather was good, the sea smooth, the boats were intended to make eight knots. In somewhere around twenty hours, if the weather got no worse, they should arrive.

But the boat compasses were all unreliable for so long a voyage over the open sea. And should the U-boat choose to follow the landing craft instead of playing tag with him, once they were out of his sight, it could surface and slaughter all the troops in those boats at leisure and with impunity. To prevent that, to guide the boats, and to help them should the weather get worse in passage, he ordered *H.M.S. Spey*, the sole guard he had, to abandon him and steam off, convoying his flotilla of twenty-four troop-laden landing craft!

"A notably courageous decision!" exclaimed Admiral Cunningham when he heard of it by radio at Gibraltar.

That left Benny and his helpless ship completely alone on the bosom of the ocean, but not so helpless as she might have looked. The *Thomas Stone* might be so wounded she couldn't move, but she still had fangs and Benny bared them. Fortunately, at least, it was daylight; he could keep a good watch. His sky guns were manned against prowling vultures from the air seeking to pick the bones of an easy victim. His few remaining landing craft were loaded with depth bombs and put over the side to patrol the seas all roundabout and drop those high explosive charges on any U-boat if Benny's submarine detection gear (our equivalent of the British Asdic)⁶ showed the near presence of one, or if the feather wake of a periscope, easily detectible on that smooth sea now that it was light, appeared anywhere.

The landing craft and *H.M.S. Spey* disappeared over the horizon to the southeast, night came, both the danger and the watchfulness increased. Finally at 9 P.M., a burst of cheers rose from the darkened decks of the *Thomas Stone*. Two British destroyers, *H.M.S. Velox* and *H.M.S. Wishart*, dispatched by Admiral Cunningham from Gibraltar, 300 miles away, raced up through the night to help!

With the *Wishart* circling about as guard, the *Velox* passed them a towline and they started once more for Algiers. But being unable to steer, the bulky *Thomas Stone* yawed erratically; finally the hawser parted. The *Wishart* sheered in, picked up another hawser from the *Thomas Stone*, towed on through the night while the *Velox* guarded.

At daybreak on November 8, a British tug, the *St. Day*, also sent out by Admiral Cunningham from Gibraltar, caught up with them and took a hand. But by now wind and sea had kicked up; towing conditions were terrible. Every possible towing combination was tried out but heavy hawsers snapped like threads and time and again the *Thomas Stone* went adrift. Still all hands stuck doggedly to the task; for four nights and three days they fought the seas and struggled haltingly onward toward Algiers.

Finally on the morning of November 11, the *Thomas Stone* was brought safely into harbor at Algiers, there to unload directly on the quay all the precious heavy equipment and especially the priceless tanks she was carrying. And there Captain Bennehoff learned

also that *H.M.S. Spey* had arrived with all the troops he had sent out, late for H-hour, but still in time for the ensuing combat, had there been any.

But there had not been. In Algiers, the French army (not dominated as in Oran or Casablanca by French admirals with peculiar ideas of *l'honneur*) had accepted our assurance that "We came as friends" and had surrendered after only token resistance. Benny's assault forces had therefore no need to land on the open beaches; the *Spey* had landed them all dryshod on the quays of Algiers' inner harbor.

So when the last tank and the last gun of the army's heavy artillery had been hoisted out of his capacious holds and landed on the quay to be delivered into army hands, Captain Bennehoff could heave a sigh of relief and report to Admiral Cunningham,

"Mission accomplished."

It had been. All his troops and all their fighting equipment had been delivered safely in North Africa, ready now for the next phase, the overland assault on Tunisia for which they were urgently needed.

But poor Benny himself had plenty to sigh over aside from relief. While his sister transports might start home for the green pastures beckoning in the Pacific where special assault ships such as his were wanted badly to work north on the island beaches from Guadalcanal toward Tokyo, there wasn't any immediate starting home for him and the *Thomas Stone*. With her rudder gone, her propeller hanging by a broken shaft, her underwater stern blasted away, and some forty feet of her above water fantail no longer supported by anything below and drooping wearily like last week's bouquet of flowers, she wasn't going anywhere. Not till a powerful ocean going tug or an ocean going ship and a super-extra towline could be obtained from somewhere to tow her, not the 150 miles only to Algiers, but this time the long 4100 miles across the U-boat infested Atlantic to Hampton Roads where she could get a new stern.

The *Thomas Stone* was 95 per cent intact and uninjured, but that missing 5 per cent of her astern was vital. Benny needed it badly to get back into action. But the particulars of the tow home

were a matter for the higher American naval authorities to decide. Till the word came from Washington, he must wait in Algiers with his ship. All that, on top of what he'd been through, was trying enough to the exhausted skipper of the *Thomas Stone* who for four days and nights had had next to no sleep, but worse followed immediately.

Hardly had the last heavy army tank been lifted out of his hold and swung ashore, to leave him light and clear of all cargo, than a group of puffing little French tugs appeared to swarm around the *Thomas Stone*, a naval officer from the Port Captain's office showed up to direct the casting loose from the quay of his mooring lines, and a French pilot clambered up on his bridge.

"What's all this for?" asked the astonished Benny of the officer down on the quay.

"We need the quay space you're occupying here in the harbor for unloading other ships!" came the reply. "We're moving you from the harbor to an anchorage in the bay outside!"

"Like hell you are!" snapped out Benny. "You just hold everything till I get the Captain of the Port!" and he dashed down his side ladder to the quay and the nearest telephone. But he might have saved his breath. He learned only, as I had, that Port Captains whether going by the name of *Commandant du Port* or its English equivalent, are bureaucrats who see nobody's problems but their own. The Port Captain stuck by his decision; he needed the quay space, the *Thomas Stone* must leave the protected harbor for an anchorage in the open bay till she could be moved onward to the United States.

In vain Captain Bennehoff protested that his ship was helpless, that she had no engine power to help herself in case of storm. Nothing made any difference. The *Thomas Stone* must move to the open bay; the quay space she was taking up was needed urgently for unloading other ships.

Benny was no person to take lying down any "no" from a Port Captain; he burned up that telephone line going all the way up the naval line, then up the army command to the top, violently objecting. But everywhere poor Benny was thrown back on the Port Captain. The Port Captain was responsible for getting the cargoes

ashore; if he, having heard all Benny's objections, still felt he had to have that quay space, he would be backed up from above. Benny went back to the Port Captain with his final appeal; it was rejected.

There was nothing further he could do. Heart-broken, he climbed back up his side ladder, stood silently by while he was cast free and towed out of the harbor to the open bay to be anchored there in the open roadstead, completely exposed to every wind blowing off the Mediterranean to the northward of him and no longer sheltered by the powerful defenses of Algiers harbor from air attack. Except that the water was shallower, he might as well have been out in the open sea again.

Benny prepared for the worst. Fate might have it in for him, he might be powerless to defeat it in the end, but before it got through with him, even inexorable Fate was going to know it had been in a battle. He made sure his anchor had a good grip on the bottom, paid out plenty of cable to make assurance doubly sure, personally checked his other anchor and cable to be certain they were ready for quick letting go. Then he stationed all his gun crews for round the clock action and posted extra lookouts, in boats as well as aloft, to keep an eye out for both U-boats and planes.

He had not long to wait.

That night there was a heavy air raid on Algiers. As usual, the harbor and all its shipping disappeared beneath a blanket of smoke. As usual the sky guns around the harbor put up a terrific umbrella of bursting shells and tracers over the harbor. As usual, the bombers, gun shy, circled the harbor outside that umbrella before undertaking even to dare its fringes (there were as yet no night-fighters in the defense picture).

But not as usual, there in the light of chandelier flares dropped from the circling planes, was the anchored *Thomas Stone* out in the open bay, unprotected by the harbor guns. From above, where her underwater stern damage was invisible, she was a perfectly good ship and a large and inviting target, well worth anybody's bombs.

Understandably enough, the bombers promptly forgot all about Algiers harbor, to concentrate on the *Thomas Stone*, which now went through an ordeal by bombs such as few ships have ever suffered singly and survived. Heavy bombs burst all about her,

showering her topsides with water and with shrapnel. The *Thomas Stone*, of course, was at a terrible disadvantage. She couldn't maneuver either to dodge bombs or to throw off the aim of the bombardiers. She was a perfect sitting duck.

But those bombers learned swiftly they had caught a Tartar. Benny wasn't taking it sitting down. With every searchlight swung up and every sky gun he had (and for a ship he had plenty) swung heavenward, all divided into sectors and with his group controls working beautifully, the *Thomas Stone* went into action, spouting fire like a fountain. She was no sitting duck but a coiled cobra, with fiery fangs lashing out in all directions at the bombers swooping down on her to unload.

The uproar was terrific. Amidst the pandemonium of detonating bombs and exploding guns, the deafening exhausts of airplane engines and the unearthly shriek of falling missiles, all lighted up by lurid tracers, rapidly moving searchlights, bursting shells, and erupting tons of TNT, Benny and his men, eyes glued to gun sights or control gear, fought doggedly back, tracking one plane after another, sometimes half a dozen at once, as the bombers streaked in for the kill.

They never got it. Bombardier after bombardier faltered in his aim or his pilot swerved sharply off as he closed to escape the flaming death coming at him from that *verdämt* ship below.

One bomb only out of dozens finally found the target, to come screaming down on deck somewhere aft and explode there with a thunderous crash. On the bridge, Benny's heart sank; any damage from a heavy bomb, on top of what already he had, would finish him.

With that solitary hit, the bombers were wholly content; surely they had polished off the target at last. They departed eastward through the night doubtless so to report, meanwhile licking their own wounds.

Suddenly the smoking guns were silent, though warily the gun crews stuck by them, ready, should the planes come back, to open up again till the stricken *Thomas Stone* vanished from beneath their feet and they no longer had any guns to fight.

Leaving his exec on the bridge, Captain Bennehoff rushed aft to

see what was necessary now to save his ship. But this time, the joke was on his assailants; nothing at all was necessary, though undoubtedly one of the largest caliber bombs the Nazis had, had crashed through his decks to detonate below. Almost unbelievably he gazed at what had happened.

The bomb, a thousand pounder from the size of the holes it left, had come down at a sharp angle on his port quarter, torn out the bottom of a lifeboat swinging there in its davits, hit the main deck leaving a hole some twenty inches in diameter, crashed through the next two decks below, leaving similar holes, and then below that had exploded—where his underwater stern should have been. Only there wasn't any stern there any more; a Nazi U-boat captain off Cape Palos, Spain, had beaten his Luftwaffe brethren over Algiers to that stern with his torpedo. The bomb had exploded only in open water where the stern used to be. The only additional damage from that 1000 pounds of TNT was a lost lifeboat and three holes which meant nothing at all in the already sagging fantail!

Next morning, Benny was on his way ashore in a small boat to see the Captain of the Port again, grimly determined to have the *Thomas Stone* moved back inside the harbor where she might get the protection of the harbor defenses to which she was as much entitled as anybody. Single-handed, he couldn't fight off the Luftwaffe every night; sooner or later, they'd surely get him, and next time not in his missing stern either. One battle like that was enough in anybody's lifetime.

Once again he got a flat refusal; flatter this time even than before. Now it was bolstered up with the added information that there was no berth for him inside the harbor; every quay was occupied by ships unloading. His spirit of fair play was appealed to—surely he wouldn't want to push another ship out into the open bay to make room inside for his?

That, countered Benny, was exactly what he *was* sure of. And furthermore, he didn't give a damn which one it might be, just so long as it was big enough to let him squeeze the *Thomas Stone* into its vacated berth. For any other ship would at least have engine power to get underway and not have to sit immobilized to take the

strafing—surely it wasn't cricket to spoil the Nazi bombers by giving them only sitting ducks to practice on. If the Captain of the Port thought war was a sport in which the spirit of fair play counted for anything, then let him make it sporting for both sides by sending out some other ship able to make a proper game of it.

As for himself and his men, they'd had enough. To hell with the spirit of fair play! All they wanted was a cushy berth inside the harbor breakwater under the protection of the harbor smoke pots and its comforting ack-ack batteries.

Benny didn't get it. All he got was compliments on the magnificent battle his ship had put up, witnessed by everybody from the sharply rising slope of Algiers as from a grandstand, and the reiterated statements from the naval and army higher commands that the Port Captain must be the final judge as to what the situation required. Aside from that, he received only a large supply of A.A. ammunition to replace what he had expended the night before. Reflecting bitterly on that, he returned to his ship feeling like a Roman gladiator; all anyone would do for him was to furnish him with the wherewithal to put on another spectacle in that vast arena formed by the open bay and the rising crescent of Algiers against its steep hill.

Benny replenished his magazines, refilled all his ready service ammunition boxes, sent as many of his crew as he dared below to rest up for the inevitable renewal of the battle, and threw his weary frame down on his berth to catch a little sleep himself. He was worn out.

But before the day faded into night, Captain Bennehoff knew he would have no worries about bombs that night at least; no planes would take the air, enemy or otherwise. For the barometer was falling rapidly, the sea was kicking up, the wind off the open Mediterranean was starting to blow hard from the northwest to strike him squarely in his exposed position. A real storm was brewing, something unusual for that season off the Algerian coast.

Benny signaled in one last frantic appeal to the Port Captain—his ship was helpless without engine power to fight the coming storm; for God's sake, send tugs to take him inside the harbor before it struck! His appeal was denied; there was no room inside

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the harbor; he must rely on his anchors.

The afternoon slipped away into night, the wind increased in strength to a gale, finally to a whole gale. Before that happened, Benny prudently heaved in on his cable as much as he dared without starting the anchor he already had down, then let go also his other anchor, and veered out chain on both cables to full scope so that he might get and keep the best possible grip on the bottom.

Then as the storm increased in fury and the seas rolling in on him off the open ocean started to crash down on his heaving bow in thunderous blows while the howling wind beating against his topsides strove to drive him down to leeward, he could do nothing further but pray. The ordinary resource of the seaman, to steam slowly ahead against the oncoming seas to relieve the strain on his cables, was denied him. His propeller shaft was broken; he had no engine power to help him. All that a man might do, he had done to meet this new peril to his ship. It was now up to his ground tackle, which was good, and the value of the bottom of Algiers Bay as holding ground, which was dubious.

Once again in the darkness Captain Bennehoff took station on the bridge with all his crew at quarters. This night again there would be no sleep for anyone—all hands were in for another battle against the worst enemy of all, the sea. Carefully Bennehoff himself took cross bearings and ranges on various lights ashore in unblacked out Algiers to mark the position of his gyrating ship, then stationed other officers at the alidades to keep constant watch on those ranges and inform him if any showed signs of change.

Amidst the roaring of the wind and the deep bass singing of his wire rigging, no very long time elapsed before alarmed cries came from the watchers at the alidades at both starboard and port wings of his bridge. The ranges were opening out, the bearings were changing, undoubtedly the *Thomas Stone* was dragging her anchors, both of them!

Bennehoff sprang to the port alidade himself to check, found it was so. As he sighted through that alidade, he could see the range of lights he had it focused on, steadily opening out. Before that storm, his ship was drifting inexorably down to leeward toward the open beach some miles astern yet! There was no question about it,

the value of the bottom of Algiers Bay as holding ground was no longer dubious; it was worthless! Sooner or later before that storm still rising in intensity, they would be driven high and dry on the beach! And there was nothing further he could do on the *Thomas Stone* to prevent it.

But Benny was no person to give up while he still lived. Although there was nothing further he could do on the *Thomas Stone* to avert disaster, there was still a thin chance to escape and he clutched at it. There was, damn him, that broken reed, the Captain of the Port, who had got him into all this—he had tugs! It was too late now ever to hope tugs could get him into the harbor, but at least they might serve in place of his dead engines to help hold him up against the seas and keep him off the beach.

The *Thomas Stone*'s signal lantern started to flash out through the night a message of distress across the tumbling seas toward Algiers harbor. She was steadily dragging both anchors, all she had, toward the beach. She must instantly have tugs, the best they had, if possible all they had, to help hold her against the storm and save her from destruction!

They got an immediate acknowledgment, then shortly an affirmative. Tugs would be sent out to help.

There was an agonized period of waiting for the tugs while the anchors dragged, the lights ashore fringing the beach grew brighter and brighter and they began to hear, mingling with all the assorted shrieks and concussions of wind and sea, the thunder of the surf breaking on the beach astern.

The tugs, tossing like corks in the mountainous waves, arrived at last. They were in plenty of time; the beach was still half a mile astern. Benny switched on his cargo lights to illuminate his side and help them get secured. On a night like that no blackout was required; he had nothing to fear except the sea.

But as the tugs came into the circles of light from his cargo reflectors, his heart sank—there were only two tugs, both French, and neither very large nor very powerful. Algiers had far more tugs than that, he knew, but probably all the others were even smaller and dared not face the stormy seas lest they founder out of hand. He must get along with those two.

He waved to the tugs to come alongside him, one each side, and he would pass them lines to secure themselves there and start heaving him ahead. He could not risk giving them towlines to try to tow ahead of him. Both his anchor cables were streamed out from his bows; there the tugs and their towlines could do nothing save swiftly foul themselves in the anchor cables.

The French tugboat captains waved back they understood everything. They were good seamen; they got alongside as directed, took the hawsers and passed them round their bitts. Immediately then they opened wide their throttles, went full out straining on the lines to hold the *Thomas Stone* up against wind and sea while they themselves tossed wildly up and down alongside her to the seas rolling by.

No sooner had the tugs a maximum strain on the lines than Captain Bennehoff was squinting again through an alidade at the lights ashore, picking out a new set for ranges to show him whether with the tugs helping, the anchors finally had taken a solid bite and were holding.

He watched in anguish a few minutes and then straightened slowly up. All hope was dead. The *Thomas Stone* was still inexorably dragging toward the beach, a little more slowly now perhaps, but just as steadily as before. In spite of heavy anchors trying to dig into the bottom and hold there, in spite of tugs almost tearing their engines off their bedplates driving furiously ahead, the implacable wind and sea were continuously pushing him and the *Thomas Stone* shoreward.

Louder and louder grew the roar of the breakers, brighter and brighter gleamed the lights of the houses ashore. The water grew much shallower, the steep seas became even steeper, the tugs began to slide up and down them as on a gigantic seesaw.

His stern entered the breakers. Benny signaled to his deck force to cast loose both tugs and get them clear. Keeping them longer, once the *Thomas Stone* was in that terrific surf, would only swamp the tugs. They could do nothing further for him. As the tugs, freed, plunged ahead into the screeching night to save themselves, Benny, high above them on his bridge, waved cheerily to their captains for the valiant effort they had made to save him. Then he

turned to peer aft through the darkness and watch helplessly while those tremendous storm waves drove his ship aground.

The stern, falling away in a trough, struck with a staggering thud that shook the whole vessel. The drifting stopped. Instantly the captain spun about, straining his eyes forward through the blackness. Now if only the anchors, still streaming forward, held, it would not be so bad. The stern was already heavily damaged; no pounding on the bottom could make it any worse.

But to his dismay, the stern had hardly gone aground than the seas crashing against his bow began to swing the stem around, anchors or no anchors. In another instant, the ship was broadside to the breaking waves, hard on the beach her whole length, shuddering convulsively under the impact of titanic sledge hammer blows. One after another those thundering waves roared in to smash squarely against her steel side and then leap skyward in solid masses of hundreds of tons of green water that came tumbling down on the decks as if to crush them in. Now at last had come the end; it seemed inconceivable that any ship could hold together long under that irresistible battering. All hands watched each instant to see her disintegrate into a mass of broken steel to leave them strangling in that maelstrom where lifebelts were worthless and no small boat could possibly survive long enough to get it launched.

But she was a stout ship, the *Thomas Stone*. Somehow she held together through it all while the pounding seas kept swinging her still further round till it was her bow, no longer her stern, that was pointed directly shoreward, with the whole ship grounded from end to end.

Each monstrous sea now as it rolled in picked up the *Thomas Stone* as if she were but a chip of wood and flung her quivering hull bodily farther up the beach till at last it seemed to her numbed captain that one more such thrust would push his stem right in amongst the brilliantly illuminated oil tanks he could see rising close before him on the shore.

But there, high and hard aground, she stuck at last, with next to no water left under her as each wave receded. Dazedly he turned to look down at the surf breaking all about him, surprised still to be alive. First the U-boat with its torpedo, then the planes with

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their bombs, now the sea itself with this last crushing blow—all had done their worst to destroy him. He had fought them all. While he lived, he would keep on fighting for his ship.

The messboy cleared away the coffee cups, lunch was over. Captain Bennehoff rose from the table.

“Come aft with me now, Captain, and you can see for yourself what’s required in the way of a salvage job to put my ship back in action. My crew and I’ll give you all the help possible.”

I rose to follow him out on deck.

28

I LEFT THE "THOMAS STONE" AFTER my inspection to go back up the hill in a navy jeep assigned to the stranded transport. We ran a few miles along the waterfront into the center of Algiers past the *Monument aux Morts* where I had first seen Admiral Darlan and General Giraud, then swung sharp left and soon were climbing the steep hill headed for the St. George and my day before Christmas tea date with the Royal Navy staff.

I had little thought left for anything except the *Thomas Stone* and what might be done to help her and her valiant captain. She would be a tough problem; she was practically high and dry, aside from all her other injuries. I sighed over the manifest injustice of life. Bennehoff was an exceptionally able captain, yet nothing but disaster had come his way; it was damned unfair. Well, when we got the *Spahi* clear, what salvage forces I had should go all out for Benny and his ship.

We were once again passing the Palais d'Etat; my eyes always got a rest gazing on those gaudily clad Spahi sentries. I glanced to the left at them as the jeep, pulling hard up the long hill, slowly went by the entrance gate.

Evidently something was wrong, decidedly wrong there. Instead of being stiffly at "Attention" as usual, the two Spahis, clutching their rifles at the "Ready," were swung nearly about, peering, both of them, into the courtyard just inside the gate. Standing inside there by the marble steps leading into the building, was a large limousine, Darlan's unquestionably, with the driver just dashing up the steps to a milling group of men a bit inside the open double doors.

My jeep crawled on by, no longer could I see through the gate. It looked to me like a brawl in ~~there~~, with that French chauffeur going in four bells to take a hand and the Arab sentries decidedly puzzled as to where they came in in a gentleman's squabble, if at all. Possibly Giraud and Darlan had at last come to blows; it seemed likely enough.

But I had troubles enough of my own without adding French politics to my headaches; I pushed that brawl out of my mind and went back to considering the *Thomas Stone* again as we chugged the rest of the way up the hill to the portico of the St. George. Soon, a few flights up, I was with Cunningham's Royal Navy staff.

Our new Admiral of the Fleet had gone to his quarters. But most of the rest were there—Rear Admiral Murray, Commodore Dick, Captain Shaw, Captain Dorling, Captain King, a few other captains, and my recent shipmate in distress, Commander Stewart, lately of the *Porcupine*, who now that his ship was decommissioned and cut in two, had been added temporarily to the staff.

The tea proved to be rather a dismal affair, a wholly forced attempt to seem a little cheerful on the day before Christmas. A few quarts of Scotch and some water turned out to be the tea. Nobody seemed interested in taking much, and certainly it showed no signs of having cheered anybody up in the slightest. The news of the collapse of the Tunisian offensive which had cost the navy plenty to help mount, was an effective enough wet blanket.

Still even without that, I doubt there would have been any real gaiety. For every officer there, excepting myself, the war had started not a year before, but nearly three and a half years before. Most had been away from home and family practically all those terrible years. Everyone could foresee two or three years more of the same before home became again something more than a cherished but dimming memory.

None of us there were young any more—past fifty, most of us now, when every year counts for much. What was there to be merry about? The others, looking back over the Christmases at home they had missed, and all of us looking ahead to those which we were bound to miss, provided we even lived to miss them, felt decidedly down in the mouth. After a drink or two, more for form's sake than

anything else, the party soon broke up into gloomy little knots discussing technical matters, then everyone began drifting out, headed for his own billet, to dream in solitude of a Christmas at home with wife and children and peace—would any of it ever again prove more than a dream?

I started back for the Aletti. It was growing dusk, Christmas Eve had arrived. I contemplated it bitterly—Christmas Eve in Algiers, with everything completely missing that had any connection whatever with that star which had glowed over Bethlehem on the first Christmas Eve so long ago—peace on earth, goodwill towards men, home, family, friends. Roundabout me were nothing but death, destruction, and strangers, and no great hope for any change; not soon, anyway. I wanted only to crawl into my bed at the Aletti as soon as I got there, pull the bed in after me, and try to forget that it was Christmas Eve. Dinner be damned; I didn't want any.

I reached the Aletti, went into the lobby, started for the elevator to realize my sole desire. One of the junior officers of the naval staff (he hadn't been at that tea; not enough rank, I suppose) stopped me, drew me well aside.

"Don't go out again tonight, Captain, if you don't have to, and don't go out at all alone. And if you must go out, go armed! That's an order from the top!"

I looked at him in astonishment. I hadn't gone armed yet in North Africa; as a matter of fact, I didn't even have a Colt .45 automatic to wear if I wanted to. My sole protection so far had been my tin hat.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Why all the sudden need for artillery?"

He considered a moment, looking at me. After all, I was one of the top members of the naval staff; including Cunningham himself, there were but three higher in rank. He decided he could risk it.

"I'm supposed only to alert the staff, not to give out why. I'll tell you, but for heaven's sake don't pass it along till it's released—it's top secret yet while they're taking precautions. *Darlan's just been assassinated!* It may mean a French uprising against us. Don't take any chances!"

I looked at him with widening eyes as that sank in. Darlan assassinated? It flashed across my mind that what I had seen earlier in the afternoon as I passed the Palais d'Etat, which I had taken for a brawl, must have been instead a scuffle with the assassin the moment after his attack!

I thanked the lieutenant, told him I'd observe the warning; I wasn't going out again that night, armed or unarmed. I stepped into the waiting elevator, started up to my room, stripped hurriedly, and fell into bed, wholly exhausted physically and mentally.

Christmas Eve! Darlan's assassination and all his death might mean was the last drop needed to make that Christmas Eve utter gall and wormwood.

29

I WAS IN THE AIR EARLY CHRISTMAS Day, on my way from Maison Blanche in Algiers to Tafaraoui in Oran.

As usual, I was in a twin-motored army transport, unarmed as they all were. Whatever the reasons, there was no fighter convoy to fly with any part of the way; we were making the journey wholly unaccompanied and unguarded. The pilot, completely on his own, had no faith in anybody's goodwill, even on Christmas Day. He elected to make the flight entirely over water, avoiding the land route, and hugging the precipitous coastline, to fly only a few feet above the surface of the sea. That way, I presume, he figured he was least likely to be spotted by any Nazi fighters out celebrating the joyous Christmas season, and safest from any trying to dive down on his tail.

We had a very light passenger list; a few army officers going back to Oran, a few officers of the Royal Navy bound for their ships at Mers-el-Kebir. The talk, of course, was centered wholly on the news of the assassination of Darlan, now officially released and both officially and unofficially spreading like wildfire all over North Africa. Already from both Rome and Berlin, the Axis radio was bellowing that the perfidious English, no longer needing Darlan as a tool, had murdered him as an obstacle to their further devilish machinations.

So far as I was concerned, I knew now I had witnessed the last scene in that swift drama; the time jibed exactly with my passing of the Palais d'Etat. What I had seen was those about Darlan closing on the assassin the moment after he had fired.

What had happened, I also knew now, was as incredible as everything else in French politics. A young French student, a Corsican, had entered the vestibule of the Palais d'Etat the morning before Christmas, demanding an audience with Darlan. With no investigation at all of the request, he had been informed simply that Darlan was out; if he cared to return about mid-afternoon, Darlan should be back by then. He had taken care to return early. Since Darlan had not yet returned, he was asked to take a seat in the vestibule and wait. He did. When Darlan's automobile arrived and Darlan, descending from it followed by his Chief of Ordnance, *le Commandant* Heurcade, entered the vestibule and turned to open the door of his office, his visitor rose and without a word opened fire on him with a small-caliber pistol, hitting him twice, once in the mouth, once in the side.

Le Commandant Heurcade, who had started to enter his own office, turned, first to try to support his falling chief, then to fling himself upon his assailant, only to catch two more bullets himself, the more serious one in the thigh. But he clung on; others dashing in disarmed the assassin and made him prisoner.

Darlan had, of course, been rushed immediately to a hospital, where on the operating table an hour later without ever having regained consciousness, he died.

Those were the facts, but not the explanation. Why had Darlan been assassinated? Who really was responsible? What was going to happen now the only strong man in French Africa, the only man whose word had been law, had been rubbed out? Over the answers to those questions, with the news out, not only all North Africa but every Allied capital was pondering furiously. And as might have been expected, Goebbels, from both Axis capitals, was pouring all the poison he could into the wound to make sure it festered rather than healed. Everyone else was speculating, but Rome and Berlin knew—of course it was the villainous English!

One of my fellow passengers, a Royal Navy commander, was discussing that philosophically. Why get heated up over the Axis accusation? It might even be true; the British had something to gain by Darlan's death. And so had the Americans, and the Vichy French, and the Giraudists, and the de Gaulleists, and most of all,

the Axis powers themselves. In fact, Darlan had enemies in every country, including his own, in every camp, in every faction; he had succeeded thoroughly in his career at one time or another since the Fall of France in giving nearly everybody good cause for wishing to see him dead. With everybody having a motive to want him out of the way, finding the actual group behind the murderer was going to be a task which might baffle even the late lamented Sherlock Holmes.

Of course, continued that commander, the British weren't behind the assassin; much as Darlan was hated in England, they just didn't do things that way. It was his opinion, seeing that the assassin was a young Corsican, that when all the turmoil and all the secret investigations seeking conspiracies and conspirators were over, it would turn out to be an act of purely personal vengeance—the Corsicans were as notorious for vendettas as the Sicilians. (And it may be said here that that was exactly the ultimate outcome.)

We flew on over the sea, the discussion went on endlessly. It turned from who killed Darlan to what was going to happen now he was dead. We had left behind us Algiers, all alerted, all in arms ready to meet by force an anti-Ally uprising if that was what Darlan's death signified. Nobody, of course, had any positive answer to that, or indeed to any part of the enigma which was Darlan.

Finally I went forward to look at the flight chart in the pilot's cabin. My eye lighted on the fact that in about twenty minutes we should be passing the promontory off Tenès, near which lay that scuttled U-boat which Admiral Cunningham was so anxious I search with divers for the existence of radar equipment or anything similar. Since we were flying over the sea anyway, why not improve the occasion by sighting that U-boat and surveying it from the air?

I explained to the pilot what I wanted; the few other passengers, forgetting Darlan for the moment, gathered round to listen. The pilot was willing to take a little time to help me out. I sketched out to him and to the others what had happened to that U-boat.

Two days after D-day in North Africa, two British planes, patrolling the sea lanes well off the coast between Oran and Algiers, had sighted a surfaced U-boat late in the afternoon some distance away. Immediately they swooped down for it, hoping at least to be able

to let go a depth bomb or two before it managed to submerge so deeply as to escape altogether.

They closed, but to the astonishment of both pilots diving down on it, that U-boat made no attempt at all to submerge. They never learned why; perhaps it had a particularly bellicose captain who was spoiling for a fight and saw no reason to run away from a few planes.

At any rate, it didn't submerge. Instead, with fine afternoon visibility conditions to favor its gunners, its two sky-guns were manned hurriedly. The two pilots diving down on it with depth charges, found themselves flying straight into two streams of heavy incendiary tracers. There was no percentage in that; they might get close enough in to drop a depth charge before they disintegrated or went afire, but the chances were they wouldn't.

Hurriedly both pilots pulled out of their dives and zoomed off sideways to save themselves. What was happening below was not according to Hoyle. Any proper U-boat should start submerging promptly the instant it sighted a plane and seek to escape under water while they dropped depth bombs on it; it wasn't supposed to stay on the surface and fight back.

But if the U-boat wanted to fight it out with guns, those two British pilots were perfectly willing to oblige and to make a gun battle of it. Leveling off a little out of range, they gabbled a bit back and forth over the radio as to their tactics. Incidentally they sent out also a wild radio call for the nearest British destroyer to rush to the spot and take a hand, for the business at issue was destroying U-boats and chivalry was no part of it. Then they went to work.

From different angles to divide the enemy fire, but always simultaneously to avoid giving him a chance to concentrate on either plane, they came screaming down out of the sky, twisting and rolling, with their own guns blazing away at that U-boat superstructure from the instant they came within range until they were out of it again.

But the U-boat skipper was not so bad himself. He steered a straight enough course while the planes were circling out of range, but the instant they started to come within it, his U-boat with both

her diesel engines full out, began to swerve all over the ocean in a dizzying snake dance that made him a target almost impossible to hit effectively, the while his own guns spat back fire at the twisting planes.

For nearly two hours thus the furious combat kept up—a draw. The planes were almost certain they had put some projectiles through the superstructure of the U-boat; they could see their tracers sending up spray all about it each time they dived in. But they were certain, without any almost, that they had taken as much in return from the U-boat—their wings were well ventilated where enemy tracers had gone through plentifully and their fuselages had suffered several hits, fortunately none yet in a vital spot.

But it was getting dark, their gasoline was getting low, and their ammunition was giving out. And still no destroyer on the horizon; the nearest one, hours away at the beginning, was racing full speed for them, meanwhile urging them by radio to keep the U-boat engaged till it might arrive.

The pilots did their best in the gathering dusk. Finally it was so dark, they could no longer see their target. There was nothing to be gained by staying longer. They couldn't track the U-boat in the darkness, even if it stayed surfaced, which was unlikely; the only sure result of trying to was that they would shortly both have to ditch in the sea, out of fuel themselves. So with a farewell report to the destroyer, still an hour away, they started for their home airfield.

The destroyer finally arrived, searched all the rest of the night, both underseas with its Asdic and above water with its lookouts and radar. When day came, it continued the search over a wide area, aided again by planes, but found nothing. Both planes and destroyer had regretfully to report the U-boat had escaped.

Late that same afternoon, the day Oran surrendered, an infantry company of G.I.s from Oran, moving slowly eastward in open order to clear the outlying country of the last fragments of French resistance, met some Arabs who volunteered the amazing information that a considerable force of armed *Germans* was hiding out in a near by barn! The company commander swiftly encircled the barn with his troops, trained some machine guns on it, then loudly

(from a safe position flat on his stomach in the stubble as were also all his men) called on the Germans to surrender or take the consequences. They surrendered.

That infantry captain was the most surprised man in all North Africa as the Nazis marched out, arms in the air, crying "Kamerad!" to find he'd captured a U-boat crew of thirty-eight sailors, complete from captain to cook! And all that nowhere near the sea, twenty miles at least inland! There they all were, all armed with rifles and in addition with the two heavy machine guns with which they'd fought off those planes. With that collection of arms they could have given their captors a terrific battle, but once ashore, they must have felt out of their element, and seeing soldiers coming at them, they had surrendered without a shot.

What did it all mean? Simply that the U-boat captain had made a terrible blunder in electing to fight it out on the surface with those planes. When night came and the planes had to depart, he found he'd thrown away his U-boat—her upper watertight hull and conning tower were so riddled by aircraft projectiles, he couldn't possibly ever submerge again without going immediately to the bottom with all hands. And on the surface, once daylight came again, he'd be certain soon to be discovered by searching destroyers that would polish him off in no time at all and probably also kill him and most of his crew while they were about it. So while the destroyer which first arrived spent the night scouring the combat area for him, he fled off in the darkness on the surface for the nearest land, off Tenès, thirty miles away.

There, about fifty yards offshore, after ferrying most of his men in several trips of a little rubber boat to the beach, he had scuttled his U-boat in fairly shallow water, then gone ashore himself with the last load. After that, gathering his crew, he had made a forced march of some twenty miles directly inland by the time the late dawn caught him. Then he and his men had all holed up for the day in that barn, only to be turned in by the Arabs whom his arrogant demands for food had antagonized.

The captives, the first of any branch of the Nazi armed services to be taken in North Africa, had been rushed in trucks to Oran by their elated G.I. captors, much set up over having beaten the Navy

to the first such catch. There General Fredendall, just taking possession of Oran itself, had radioed to Eisenhower at Gibraltar, stating he had thirty-eight German U-boat prisoners and asking instructions as to disposition. Eisenhower instantly radioed back to put the s.o.b.s on the first convoy back to the United States, with his earnest hopes that if any vessel in that convoy got torpedoed by a U-boat, it'd be the one they were on.

So there now, somewhere off Tenès, lay a scuttled U-boat in shallow water which I had orders to search with divers when I could.

We rounded the last promontory to the eastward of Tenès. The co-pilot gave me his seat to get the best possible view all around from the nose windows for my aerial survey. Everybody else crowded up close behind, eager for a look also at the first U-boat knocked out in the Torch invasion.

As we swung left into a little bay, the co-pilot, standing behind me, pointed excitedly. Half a mile ahead in the surf off an empty beach, was something protruding. The pilot throttled down as much as he dared and headed directly for it.

We swung low over it, not fifty feet above the surface. It was a U-boat, all right. There was the chariot bridge, completely out of water, and even about half of the conning tower exposed; so much exposed I could make out the insignia painted on it—some sort of griffon, claws ferociously upraised. That seemed to express the spirit of its late commander; his spirit as long, anyway, as he had his U-boat under his feet, though not on land.

The U-boat was badly heeled to starboard; so considerably heeled down that its port handrail showed occasionally as the surf broke over the deck. That was all that was visible.

The pilot circled it three or four times, banking heavily to keep it in view as much as possible, with a final pass directly over it at about 500 feet altitude so that I might get a good view directly down on it through the water. I surrendered my seat, with many thanks to both pilot and co-pilot for their help, and retired to my aluminum bench aft in the fuselage to think and to make a few notes for future reference.

It was evident to me that that U-boat captain had been either a very smart chap indeed, or had profited by an extraordinary stroke

of dumb luck, which was unlikely—he could not possibly have scuttled his U-boat in a position which both better suited his needs and at the same time made it more difficult for divers to go through his boat for search purposes.

If he sank his sub in water deep enough to be beyond any diving depth, he would have jeopardized his own escape after the scuttling with only a small rubber boat to get his crew ashore. And running her hard up on the beach, while it would have made escape very simple, would have left the vessel an easy object of search.

Instead he had elected to scuttle her in about twenty feet of water, where escape was still simple, but where, in the midst of even everyday surf, diving was almost impossible even though the depth of itself was nothing for any diver. There in that surf, the radical and rapid variations in pressure on the diver below as the waves rolled in to break over him, would immediately burst his eardrums and subject him to intolerable agony under which he couldn't possibly work.

Even if I had had divers galore (which, of course, I hadn't) there could be no internal search of that U-boat without first dragging her closer inshore into water shallow enough to expose her deck hatches fully; or dragging her farther offshore into such deep water we would be clear of the surf; or waiting for a day so calm there would be no surf at all; this last, a hopeless event until summer came. Under any conditions, regardless of Cunningham's desires, it was clear to me there was going to be no search inside that U-boat for months yet, if ever. A very versatile officer, that U-boat captain; evidently he knew all about diving and divers, too.

C H A P T E R

30

WE GOT TO TAFARAOUT AIRFIELD about noon. As usual, it was a sea of deep mud off the runways. There was my own jeep waiting, not very close. As always, I had to flounder through clinging mud to get to it. We drove off to the Grand Hotel d'Oran.

Hardly had I entered the lobby than a sentry informed me that under orders from Algiers, Oran was in a state of extreme alert. Every military unit was standing to under arms; all passes for Christmas had been canceled. No officer was to leave his quarters except on the most urgent business. He was to stand by there awaiting orders, and he *must* stand by always armed, even inside his quarters.

Inasmuch as I had no firearms at all, I was nonplused as to how I might comply till the corporal of the headquarters guard offered to lend me a spare rifle from the guard room rack till next day I could draw a pistol. I checked the rifle to make sure it was fully loaded and at the "Ready"; then after a bite of lunch, with a few extra clips of rifle cartridges, I clambered up the dingy stairs to my cold room.

So this was Christmas Day! A Merry, Merry Christmas to us all, I muttered cynically. There being nothing else I could do, first I carefully locked the door so that the assassins evidently anticipated by the higher command from all their precautions, might be delayed a bit in breaking in on me. Then I took off my shoes, climbed into bed to avoid freezing during my enforced long stay in that room, and placed my loaded and ready rifle close alongside my

pillow so there might be no seconds lost in going into action with it if required.

There was one offset. Now at last, for the first day since my arrival in North Africa, I had plenty of time to finish a letter home to my wife, which letter I had started in pencil in the plane, expecting it as usual to be brief. Propped up on the pillows, covered by all the blankets I had and my overcoat, fountain pen in right hand and rifle muzzle nuzzling comfortingly into my left side, I started.

By the time midnight arrived, with time out only for dinner, that haltingly written letter which poured out my heart that Christmas Day in yearnings for home had run to ten closely written sheets of ordinary business size paper. Finally on sheet number ten, my paper having given out, I closed with,

"And now it being practically midnight, and Christmas nearly over on the most un-Christmaslike Christmas I have ever seen, I shall end by saying with Tiny Tim on Christmas Day, 'God bless us, every one!' and may He give us Christmas Days to come on which we may be merry."

I felt a little better. Words were not much as substitutes for a living and loving presence, but at least they were a slight tie and all that remained available to me. I rolled over, made sure that rifle was still conveniently close alongside me on the bed, and wearily went to sleep.

Next morning I rose to learn that the state of "Alert" was over. Nothing else untoward had occurred anywhere in North Africa; no signs of any real conspiracy had been unearthed; apparently Darlan's murder was an act of personal vengeance, for which indeed shortly after Christmas Day the murderer paid with his own life. Giraud had taken over after much bickering among the ex-Vichyite governors, admirals, and generals who still ruled in French North Africa, as to who should succeed Darlan. Certainly Giraud was the best choice; he, at least, was not tarred with the Vichy stick. But the only reason he was finally agreed upon was apparently that other more powerful candidates feared to expose themselves to Darlan's fate. Giraud, on the contrary, really was a French military hero with few enemies, though to counterbalance that, he had little influence and few friends, and except Eisenhower, no

powerful supporters at all.

At any rate, the fears of a widespread plot to assassinate all Allied officers and turn the country over again to Axis control, were past. I gave my rifle back, with thanks, to the corporal of the guard. Nor was there any need now for me to draw a Colt .45, which if left in my room, would certainly and swiftly be stolen for resale on the black market, and if worn, would be a damned incumbrance to me in getting about wrecks, and fine ballast to help sink me in case I fell overboard.

I went down to the salvage quay for an inspection. Everything appeared to be going as well as might be expected. On the *Spahi*, Lieutenant Ankers' second string divers were busily engaged below the sea in rolling out the barrels. These, now piling up in a large storeroom ashore under armed military guard, began to give the place quite a bonded warehouse appearance. I told Ankers my figures showed about 500 hogsheads should be enough, they were so large. Long before his first string divers finished with the patch, Ankers assured me he would have that many out; there would be no delay on that account.

Captain Harding and his crew on the *King Salvor* I found all still nursing their burns, their blisters, their bruises, and their wounds, but all up on deck again. They had turned their salvaged Hindoo in to the military hospital ashore, but all hands were very much down in the mouth that they didn't have the *Strathallan* there in the outer harbor to go with him.

I gave Captain Harding a letter of commendation to his crew to be read out at quarters, each man then to be furnished a copy of it for his record. As for Harding himself, I told him I'd recommended him to Admiral of the Fleet Cunningham for a decoration, which Cunningham had assured me he was certain His Majesty, the King, would be happy to bestow on him. He'd earned it.

The rest of the day I spent out over the Grand Dock with Bill Reed, his crew, Perrin-Trichard, and his French contingent. Except that Reed had discovered that the wooden plugs I'd furnished him wouldn't drive in solidly enough to plug the air vents tightly and consequently he'd have to build forms and pour cement into the

whole lot of vent pipes to seal them off, he was getting along all right.

He had the job nicely organized on an international basis. Perrin-Trichard and his French divers, much happier now with their two much worn but serviceable Made-in-America diving suits, were doing all the plumbing work on the vast system of air lines that had to be laid at the bottom of the sea to carry compressed air to the fifty widely spread compartments in that vast dock. Meanwhile, Reed and his American divers from Massawa had assumed the burden of sealing up the innumerable openings all over the dock which required to be made airtight so as to retain the compressed air to be pumped in ultimately to lift the dock.

Both tasks were tough on the divers, but Reed's was the more dangerous—his men would have to get inside the compartments of that wrecked dock to get at much of what they had to seal off. And in some cases, it was going to be terrible; some spots to which the men would have to worm their way amongst the criss-crossed steel ribs inside that dock were next to impossible of access even in an unflooded condition to a man unincumbered by a ponderous diving rig.

But all hands, American and French, seemed satisfied with their assignments and were going at them hammer and tongs. They wanted, all of them, to see the Grand Dock speedily afloat again.

Reed had only one grievance. His diving air compressor hadn't shown up from Yum Dum and he'd lost all hope. Glumly he admitted to me he'd been swindled by a silver-eagled sharper; his faith in human nature had suffered a sad shock.

I made no comment; there was no gain in rubbing it in. I simply congratulated him on how well he had things going—his job was certainly one spot in French North Africa where Allied co-operation was 100 per cent.

Bill Reed's face lighted up at that; he explained,

"Y'see, Cap'n, it's simple; all y' have to do is to treat 'em as if y' were one of 'em. I just talk French to 'em all now and they appreciate it. I always say 'Monsour' to that French lieutenant and 'Bon swar' to all his divers and we all get along fine."

I thought so. I had noted in Massawa that after long months of

contact with the Eytie prisoners of war who made up most of our labor force, Bill's Italian had never with them got beyond "Bono!" and "No bono!"; this last phrase usually with some profane English expletive inserted between the two Italian words, more clearly to express his meaning to some Eytie who was botching the job. I should have fallen dead of heart failure if in only one week in Oran he had really gone much further in French.

But I only looked at him in admiration.

"Bill," I said, "you're doing wonderful! You've certainly got it on me! I can't talk to 'em myself in French at all, and I've been here four times as long as you. When I'm up against it, all I can do myself is to talk to 'em in Spanish; lots of 'em here in North Africa understand that. And that's my limit. But French! That's something!"

Bill's one eye gazed at me dubiously. Was I kidding him? But I gazed back very soberly; he decided not. So we parted for a few days. I should be busy next day with other matters; after that I had to go to Casablanca to look over the situation there.

The following day, December 27, I spent mostly on doing my own office work, finishing up finally with Commander Robert Bell, U.S.N., who had recently been rushed over from the United States to take charge in Oran of the repairs to damaged vessels, once the salvage forces delivered them where they might be repaired. He had just completed bracing up the two halves of *H.M.S. Porcupine* for their voyage back to England. Now he had another damaged limey to cope with on the Petit Dock, which was just lifting it out of water.

That vessel, *H.M.S. Enchantress*, ex-Admiralty yacht, stripped now of all her yacht-like fittings and converted to use as an armed sloop, was somewhat smaller than our own destroyer escorts, but intended for the same purposes—convoying and anti-submarine patrol. The *Enchantress*, badly damaged but still fully able to get into port on her own for repairs, had just come in with a convoy.

She needed repairs all right, but for once before I was through, I eyed with pleasure the damages to a friendly warship.

As the Petit Dock floated her up completely out of water, her whole bow was exposed to my gaze, as badly smashed in from her

waterline all the way down to her keel as if she had hit a stone quay going full speed. She looked terrible.

Alongside me at the head of the dry dock were a number of her seamen, stout-looking fellows, all staring with evident relish at the wrecked bow, crumpled up like a folded accordion for at least twenty feet back from where her stem once had been.

"What did you hit?" I asked of the nearest British seaman. Collisions were common in convoy work, especially at night.

"Oh, we just rammed a U-boat," he replied.

A U-boat, eh? That was better. I took another look at what was left of that bow, then observed,

"Bad smash you got out of it. What happened to the U-boat?"

"She's down below," was his laconic reply. And that was all I could get out of him or any of his mates. But I didn't doubt him; not only must that U-boat now be down below, but unquestionably it must be down there in two well separated pieces.

I looked again at the slim, yacht-like lines of the graceful little vessel called the *Enchantress*. Everything fitted her name. But the terrific punch she packed in her bow? What's in a name? I wondered. She should have been named the *Joe Louis*.

31

NEXT DAY, WITH EVERYTHING IN

Oran going all right, I took off from Tafaraoui to go westward this time. Casablanca on the Atlantic was the western limit of the Torch theater and of my responsibilities, though by now it was not of great military value or importance any longer. Georgie Patton, tough, swaggering, belligerent, had seen to that very swiftly, both with his actual French antagonists in its taking and with his potential antagonists, the Spaniards, to the north of it directly afterwards. If peace existed, even nominally, when Patton arrived anywhere, it existed thereabouts in fact thereafter. But since I knew I should be working shortly mostly from Algiers eastward up to Tunisia, I seized the opportunity to check on Casablanca before I left the Oran area.

It was a moderately long hop to Casablanca, about 500 miles. Not having started very early, I didn't arrive till late afternoon. Casablanca had one advantage on both Oran and Algiers which I noted the moment I disembarked—there was no mud to bog down in. It certainly was unfortunate for Eisenhower that his campaign now against the Nazis had to be fought out in muddy Tunisia instead of in dry Morocco.

But in what for me at the moment was of major importance, Casablanca in Morocco resembled its sister cities of Oran and Algiers in Algeria; it was just as jammed. By the time a billet was finally arranged for me on the eighth floor of the Hotel Plaza, directly overlooking the harbor and all its shipping, it was completely dark and too late for any inspecting. I could do nothing more than report my presence to Rear Admiral James Hall, U.S.N.,

Flag-Officer-in-Charge, Casablanca.

Jimmy Hall, whom I had known ever since both of us were midshipmen, big, rangy, slow-spoken, an excellent commanding officer, faced what physically was a very dismal outlook in his command, though he wasn't unduly wrought up over it. He was getting along all right, he felt, though it was depressing to look at all the wrecks dispersed about Casablanca. Fortunately, the harbor was unblocked and to a high degree usable; that was the major point. Removing wrecks in his harbor was only a convenience, not a necessity.

All the wrecks in Casablanca harbor were the results, not of French sabotage as in Oran, but of French resistance. One of the most powerful battleships in the world, the French *Jean Bart*, had been lying in Casablanca ever since the Fall of France. As big and fast and intended to be about as heavily armed as anything afloat at that time, she had been sent hastily, not yet quite completed nor wholly armed, to Morocco when France started to crumble before Hitler's onslaught in May, 1940. There, able to steam but as yet fitted only with half her main battery turret guns, she had since been berthed against a quay in Casablanca harbor, with her forward turret, carrying four 15-inch guns, pointing directly seaward, still a formidable antagonist.

To take care of the *Jean Bart*, the fleet convoying Patton's assault forces had been given our own new battleship, the *Massachusetts*, flagship of Rear Admiral Giffen, of exactly the same size as the *Jean Bart* but, of course, carrying all of her own nine 16-inch guns. As matters stood, the *Massachusetts* had over twice as powerful a battery as her presumed antagonist.

Admiral Michelier, the French commandant at Casablanca, refused personally to see our emissary on D-day and scornfully spurned our statement that "We come as friends." His reply was in the form of salvos from every battery he had afloat or ashore, including the main battery guns of the *Jean Bart*.

As they let go at our ships, one of Michelier's aides remarked to our emissary bearing the friendly invitation to Admiral Michelier to join us and co-operate against the only enemy France really had, the Nazis,

"Voilà votre réponse!"

Very well then. Rear Admiral Giffen on his flagship, the *Massachusetts*, well out at sea, opened up on the *Jean Bart* at ranges varying from ten to fourteen miles and fired some seventy 16-inch armor-piercing shells at her. The *Massachusetts*' gunnery was excellent as to range, but unfortunately as a target the *Jean Bart* was very poor. She was completely lost to view from seaward amongst all the other shipping on both sides of her in the inner harbor. In addition, the high buildings directly behind her and only across the street from her (amongst which my own billet, the Hotel Plaza, was one) gave no background against which even her masts stood out.

So to insure hitting the *Jean Bart*, the *Massachusetts* played her salvos all up and down the inner harbor on both sides of her objective. She hit the *Jean Bart* all right—five times—and silenced her. The shell which did that within fourteen minutes of the opening of the engagement, the fifth and last hit, struck the *Jean Bart*'s forward turret which was then busily engaged in firing at the *Massachusetts*, a much better target. That shell jammed the turret, put it out of action, ricocheted off still unexploded, and finished up practically intact lying in the city streets behind. There Admiral Michelier, still full of fight, retrieved it, promptly set it up in front of his office building on shore, and lest anyone in Casablanca should doubt his estimate as to who really were the friends of France, sarcastically placed against that shell a placard bearing (in French, in large letters) the inscription,

"WE COME AS FRIENDS!"

The *Jean Bart* was silenced and the *Massachusetts* soon quit firing at her, being fully occupied thereafter, together with our cruisers and destroyers, in taking care of various French cruisers, destroyers, and submarines which Michelier sent out from the harbor to sink the transports busily engaged in landing Patton's troops north of the harbor.

But, reflected Jimmy Hall, now Flag-Officer-in-Charge at Casablanca, as he gazed sadly at the wreckage, he wished the *Massachusetts* had stayed home. For her heavy shells, feeling alongside every quay for the *Jean Bart*, had sunk pretty nearly everything else

then in the harbor, merchantmen mostly. The *Massachusetts* and her 16-inch shells had very thoroughly washed up French shipping in Casablanca.

The fighting, both afloat and ashore, had lasted for three days, but everything was well in hand by the morning of November 11th. By then, Patton, having surrounded Casablanca on the land side, was all set for the final assault when Darlan's order to cease resistance came through and Admiral Micheler, recognizing his master's voice, promptly obeyed it. However, in spite of three days of continuous fighting on land and sea and some very sharp engagements in both places, it finally happened that we lost far more men on the decks of the little *Hartland* alone in the assault on Oran harbor than the entire campaign in Morocco cost us.

I said goodnight to Jimmy Hall and retired to my room at the Hotel Plaza. Being rather high up, on the eighth floor and facing the harbor, I got a beautiful night view of the harbor and all its shipping, all lighted up (except the wrecks) and spread out before me.

Casablanca and its harbor were never blacked out. Being about 1000 miles from the nearest enemy territory in Tunisia or Sicily, and over 800 miles from Occupied France, with neutral Spain in between, it apparently considered itself beyond bomber attack range. There had never been an enemy air raid on Casablanca, though looking down from my window, I could see across the street in the dock area and a trifle to my right, a new A.A. battery manned by our troops and surrounded shoulder high by a parapet of sandbags as a protection.

Almost directly before me I could look down on the *Jean Bart*, stern toward me, seemingly in as good condition as before D-day, the most brilliantly illuminated ship in the harbor. She was quite impressive, but I spent little time on her or anything else. I was too tired. Tomorrow, close aboard and in daylight, I could get a better view.

I spent the next two days looking over Casablanca and its harbor. There was unquestionably a fine collection of wrecks in Casablanca, French warships and French merchantmen, all resting on the bottom except the *Jean Bart*. There were even a few of our

own merchant ships and one of our destroyers, all torpedoed but all still afloat and awaiting temporary repairs so they could go home. However, after assuring myself that for our purposes the harbor was usable, I lost interest. I was getting weary of seeing wrecks; if keeping them afloat or getting them out of the way was not imperative to our war needs, then they could stay wrecks for all of me.

In all this I was accompanied by Captain William A. Sullivan of our Navy, locally in charge of salvage. But only one thing he pointed out to me in Casablanca really caught my eye, and that was a warehouse, not a wreck. My pulse started to race madly when we entered that warehouse. There before me, already in Africa, was the realization of all my dreams—a warehouse floor covered with salvage equipment—diving suits, salvage pumps of all sizes, hose galore, air compressors, tools, practically everything I needed for the Torch theater and had been beating my brains out trying to get from America! And I had just had to rob my Americans in Oran of two of their scant supply of diving dresses in order that half a dozen of my French divers might have at least that many safe suits to dive in!

Feverishly I started to estimate mentally how much of all that Casablanca really needed; the rest should be divided up immediately between Bône, Bougie, Philippeville, Algiers, and Oran so that we might start effectively to cover the salvage problem in the really hot war theater, the Mediterranean.

But Sullivan, seeing me starting to count everything, correctly interpreted the reason and brought me down out of the clouds with a thud. Neither he nor all that salvage gear really belonged to Torch, he said; they were there only temporarily. His real assignment was supervising for the Navy a commercial salvage company working on the capsized *Normandie* in New York harbor; all the equipment I was looking at, while Navy equipment, belonged to the *Normandie* job also. Both he and it had been loaned only temporarily for the most urgent work in Casablanca; the patching up mainly of our own damaged vessels so they could go home. As soon as that was completed, both he and all the gear and all the American divers (he had brought plenty from the *Normandie*)

would all have to go back to work on her. He could not permit any of that *Normandie* salvage gear to be taken out of Casablanca and used elsewhere; he had no authority to do so.

I left that warehouse feeling like a man perishing of thirst in the desert within sight of an oasis of water which he knows he will never have strength enough to reach alive. I knew that never would any of that profusion of American salvage equipment get where it was most needed. The *Normandie* didn't need it; that monument in New York harbor to the stupidity, ignorance, and cowardice which had caused her loss, even if raised again, could never take any part in *this* war. And Casablanca, already left in the backwash of war, a thousand miles away from the fighting front and next to useless now in the war effort, didn't need it either.

However, Casablanca was on the Atlantic and could have it, needed or not. But Bône, Bougie, Philippeville, Algiers, and Oran—all the ports that Eisenhower desperately needed now more than ever for a build-up to counter the Axis in a spring campaign—they couldn't have it, even though American lives depended on those ports. They were in the Mediterranean, an area of British responsibility! Red tape, RED TAPE, RED TAPE! It was harder to fight than the enemy. I walked silently out of the warehouse.

I had seen enough of Casablanca; too much, in fact, for my morale. It was December 30. I went directly from that warehouse to the army transport service to see when I could get a seat for a flight eastward to Oran. There proved to be nothing available till New Year's morning; I put myself down for that. Till then, I might as well stay in my hotel room and recuperate from the shock I had just received. I couldn't stand much any more. I had been about finished off when I came out of Massawa. The last month, at sea and ashore in the Mediterranean, hadn't helped any in building me up again. Right after dinner, with the idea of spending all next day in bed also, I turned in. I was so far gone, I fell asleep immediately.

A tremendous explosion which nearly knocked me out of bed awakened me. Everything was shaking violently; I expected next instant to feel the ceiling and the walls of the room come crashing down on me. I recognized that sound all right—a heavy bomb had

hit the hotel! Instinctively I leaped through the darkness from the bed to the front wall, the heaviest one structurally and the wall most likely to remain standing when the rest collapsed; before I reached it, everything started rocking afresh from two more explosions.

But nothing collapsed. I was right by the window; I looked out into the night. Almost under my nose so it seemed, though up a bit, was a huge four-engined Nazi bomber, zooming seaward low over the harbor!

It had just released three bombs. I could see the dust and smoke still rising from the crater where the first had struck between me and the harbor; the nearest, I saw now, was not an actual hit on the hotel. It had landed very close by, hardly fifty feet short of that sandbagged parapet shielding the A.A. battery, peppering it with sand and shrapnel. And no doubt, wakening the men there as it had wakened me, for the guns of that battery were just beginning to fire at the tail of the big bomber streaking low across the harbor away from them.

Hardly a few seconds more and the bombardier pulled his releases again, to let go three more bombs. But so narrow was the harbor that these three hit beyond the far side of the seaward breakwater, to explode there, damaging nothing.

That bombardier had thoroughly botched his job. He and his heavy bomber had caught Casablanca wholly unawares, all lighted up, a perfect target. There had been no alarm, no blackout, no smoke pots going to hide the ships, no sirens to alert the guns. He might have picked any target in the harbor or more than one and smacked it with his bombs as at target practice. But too nervous with his trigger finger, he had let go the first three bombs in an open area just short of the harbor where they did no damage, and then realizing his mistake, had quit releasing for a moment, only to make another mistake by misjudging the width of the harbor and holding his second stick of bombs till too late to hit anything with them either. All he had accomplished was thoroughly to alert a sleeping harbor; the air raid sirens were wailing now, but they weren't needed. Every searchlight was coming on; every A.A. gun, ashore and afloat, was starting to fire at that swastika-decorated,

four-engined plane which was now banking hard left to circle the harbor on the far side. Of course they didn't hit him. It shortly disappeared into the darkness on the landward side.

Now came the roar of more airplane engines, four-motored jobs like the first one. I stuck my head out the window and looked upward, but could see nothing. There was a solid cloud ceiling at about 3000 feet; these new planes were apparently above it and invisible. Of course, the harbor was also invisible to them. The guns from all around the harbor perimeter, plus all those on the ships before me, including the *Jean Bart*, were now firing at those hidden planes; radar-controlled, I suppose. That umbrella of bursting iron apparently discouraged the new attackers; none got over the harbor, no further bombs were dropped, the beat of engines died away, and in about twenty minutes the "All Clear" sounded.

I dressed, put on my tin hat, and went up on the roof. No doubt there would be a renewal; it was only 3:30 A.M., and those planes, if not others also, would certainly come back. What the devil had happened, I wondered? Why no air raid warning before the bombers came in? Casablanca must have as good radar protection as Algiers; the radar watchers should have picked up those huge planes at least twenty minutes before their arrival and alerted everything to be ready for them.

Had the Germans not bungled their attack, they could have flattened out all shipping in Casablanca, caught just as unawares as our fleet at Pearl Harbor. If all their heavy planes had come in at once under that cloud ceiling on the unalerted ships, the results would have been horrible; the ships would all have been flaming wrecks before they could begin to man their guns. But the Nazis, I suppose, had not believed we could be such dumbbells twice in succession. They had grossly underrated our capacity for stupidity and had sent in only one plane to scout the situation under the cloud ceiling before the main attack, and that plane had bungled its mission as badly as we our preparedness for attack.

At 4 A.M., the second wave of bombers struck, some above the clouds, some below it. By then, of course, the defense was prepared to meet them. A literal fountain of fire covered the harbor; neither the planes above nor below the ceiling dared enter it. Particularly

did it intrigue me to watch the *Jean Bart*, which not so long before had been flinging 15-inch shells at us, spouting tracers upward in vast profusion at the Nazis.

Two planes below the ceiling, caught in the searchlights and plainly visible—whirling propellers, wide-spread wings, swastika markings—were so low and so huge it seemed one could hardly miss them with a rock. And yet a heavy volume of tracer fire concentrating on them as they circled the harbor, afraid to get over it, wasn't hitting either of them—it was all falling short astern their tails.

On its second circuit, the tracers did start to creep up on the tail of one of those planes flying about half a mile inland of the harbor. The crew of that Nazi plane must have come to the conclusion that our men were learning a little something; shortly the guns might catch up. At any rate, they decided to lighten up and get out; suddenly they let go all their bombs in one stick right where they were.

Down came the shrieking bombs to land in the native quarter of Casablanca, explode with a terrific series of detonations, and light up the skies with an unearthly white fire which lasted some twenty minutes—incendiary bombs, evidently. The plane itself, suddenly lightened up, streaked away inland in the darkness, apparently unhit.

That ended the second attack.

About 5 A.M. came a third wave, but by now the bombers were wary. They stayed high up, dropped their bombs at random well clear of the harbor and even of the city, and did no damage. Shortly they disappeared also, the "All Clear" sounded again, and the first and last enemy air raid that Casablanca ever had, was finally over. I went below and turned in again.

The raid changed my plans. Instead of spending December 31 in bed, I went out after breakfast to inspect the damage. I learned a lot.

First I learned that it had been the blundering at Pearl Harbor all over again. A false sense of security had once more let the enemy in on an unsuspecting harbor full of ships. The army radar watch had picked up the first wave of four-engined bombers north of

Port Lyautey, over ninety miles and at least twenty minutes flying time away. Without checking, without forcing an identification, and of course without giving any alarm, the officer in charge of the radar watch had assumed the planes were friendly and had done nothing at all save track them southward all the way to Casablanca. Those first three exploding bombs had been his first inkling that his conclusions were erroneous. That Casablanca harbor was not completely destroyed as a result was not his fault.

I ran into General Patton and his aides out inspecting damage also. We met on opposite sides of the considerable crater in the roadway near the sandbagged A.A. battery. His aides were busy salvaging bomb fragments from the hole; Patton seemed absorbed in studying the blast and shrapnel effect on the impromptu parapet around that battery. Then he moved off inland to see what the bombs had done to the native quarter while I went in the opposite direction toward the shipping to see if any damage at all had resulted there.

The raid turned out to be a draw—we had hit no planes, the planes had hit no ships. Except for some eighty inoffensive Arabs killed and many more wounded by that Nazi bomber jettisoning all its bombs over the native quarter, there was no damage discoverable on either side. But military circles were seething over our being caught unawares.

As Georgie Patton put it at the time in a letter (later published) to his wife, in which naturally he had to be reticent,

"About ten o'clock I had a meeting of all aviators and anti-aircraft officers to discuss the scheme of defense and to make the necessary corrections. We were of the opinion that everything had gone satisfactorily, but that a few changes were desirable. These have now been made."

If I knew anything about Patton, I had little doubt that the "necessary corrections" and the "few desirable changes" exploded about the heads of the derelict radar watch officers and of the ineffective A.A. gunnery officers with a blast to which that of the first bomb was but a firecracker. That last sentence of his, "These have now been made," was significant in its very brevity. Next to

the dead Arabs, I believe those officers of his comprised the major casualties in the raid.

Having taken care of his own men at ten o'clock that morning, Patton turned next to consideration of the Arabs. The man who had the reputation of never opening his mouth in public without putting his foot into it; of being "Old Blood and Guts," an inhuman warrior; of having not the slightest glimmering of political sagacity, on this occasion at least rose to the heights with a bit of humanity that endeared him to every native in North Africa and a diplomatic stroke that Talleyrand himself might well have envied.

The Arabs all over North Africa, whether in Morocco, Algeria, or Tunisia, had been on the fence ever since D-day, neither helping us nor opposing us. On the face of things, our entrance into the picture could only result in riveting a tottering French rule more firmly on their countries; they were the vast majority. On the other hand, Hitler's agents had been wooing them (as well as Egypt), promising a bright and independent Arab future should they assist him. What should they and their Emirs, Pachas, and Sultans do? They had as yet come to no conclusion about it. When Georgie Patton got through with them after that air raid, they promptly made up their minds.

First, that day he personally visited the smashed Arab quarter to condole with those who had escaped and to mourn with the relatives of those who had died; then he went to the hospitals to cheer the wounded.

But that was not all. Kind words alone heal no wounds, feed no orphans. Out of his own pocket, with no hope whatever of reimbursement from his government, he gave the sum of 100,000 francs for the immediate relief of the wounded and the families of the dead, that then, that very day, not weeks or months later, they might have aid, food, bandages, attendance.

The more immediate needs of the distressed Arabs having been taken care of by him, he launched his master stroke. Who shall say that when necessity arose, George Patton was not as good a diplomat as the best America ever produced, Benjamin Franklin, for instance? He issued a ringing proclamation to the Arabs, till then wavering in indecision as to which side they should favor. It was

brief, it was to the point, it was decisive. It took the form of an open letter to the Pacha of Casablanca which was broadcast over the Arab world:

Your Excellency:

Will you permit me to express to you, and through the kind medium of Your Excellency, to the friends and relatives of your coreligionists so brutally murdered in the Nouvelle Médina, my profound sorrow and my solicitude.

This assault, as unwarranted as it was barbarous, upon an inoffensive quarter, devoid of all military objectives, is but a fresh manifestation of the brutal and cruel character of our common enemy. May God destroy him!

In writing this letter, I express not only my own sentiments but those also of my immediate chief, General Eisenhower.

I have the honor of remaining very sincerely,

GEORGE S. PATTON, JR.,
Major General, U. S. Army.

There wasn't an Arab in North Africa, after hearing in his bazaars what Patton had done and reading in strange Arabic characters that letter, who had the slightest doubts any longer as to who were his friends and who were his enemies. From then on, all over North Africa, the Arabs were solidly on our side.

32

EARLY ON NEW YEAR'S MORNING I took off from Casablanca for Oran.

Something struck me; again it was a holiday. The next holiday would be February 12, Lincoln's Birthday. Where, I wondered, if I were still all in one piece, would I be bound in a plane on that holiday? For each of the last three holidays had found me in the air, flying around Africa. Thanksgiving Day, I had been jumping across the Sahara from Khartoum to Accra; Christmas Day, I had hopped from Algiers to Oran; New Year's Day found me flying from Casablanca to Oran. What would the next holiday bring?

On this flight, we flew fairly high, at around 9000 feet, and above a very heavy cloud bank a good part of the journey over Morocco. We crossed the rugged Atlas Mountains, all snow-covered, with one peak, somewhat resembling the Matterhorn, sticking through our cloud bank like an island floating on a fleecy blanket. It was very cold in the plane.

It was a relief therefore, a little after noon, to come down on Tafaraoui Airfield, where it was merely normally cold, and, of course, muddy as usual. I plodded through the mud to my jeep and ordered my colored sergeant to drive me directly to the *King Salvor*. I was anxious to catch up with what had been done during my absence and besides I could get a bite to eat more easily at that hour on the ship than at the Grand Hotel.

We started on our fifteen mile trek to Oran. I looked around. In the vicinity of Oran, at least, the New Year had begun auspiciously—overhead it was cloudless, there was no wind, a bright sun lent a cheerful aspect to everything.

In half an hour we were rolling through the depressing streets of Oran towards the harbor. We came to the northerly precipice below which lay the harbor, and swung left to descend the steep incline. But hardly had we made the turn and dropped a yard or two than I told the driver to haul to the right side of the road and stop a few minutes. Before me, looking out to sea from that high elevation was such a heavenly scene, hardly to be glimpsed once in a lifetime, that I wanted to absorb it more at leisure.

Stretching away on the right to the northward was the Mediterranean, clearly visible out to the sharp horizon at least ten miles off, sparkling under a clear and cloudless sky, an azure blue sea which warmed the heart. And to complete the picture, there some three miles out, steaming slowly eastward parallel to the coast line, was a long line of freighters, evenly spaced, twelve of them, with the sun glistening against their starboard sides, the sides toward me. The leading ship was just turning hard right to head for the outer harbor of Oran; none of the others in that long line yet had started to swing in her gleaming wake. A little beyond them zigzagged a few destroyers, overhead lazily circled some guarding planes, shepherding into port at last that heavily laden convoy which they had brought to haven safely after a 4000 mile journey across the dangerous Atlantic and through the Straits.

I scanned those ships and the calm blue seas about them appreciatively, enchanted by the quiet beauty of the gray ships, the splendor of the ocean, the radiance of the sky. It was a scene to quicken the pulse of any man who loved the sea and the ships which float upon it. I leaned back to drink it in.

But as I gazed, the middle ship in that long line suddenly erupted from end to end in a volcanic burst of belching flame billowing luridly upward perhaps a quarter of a mile with incandescent streaks of fire rising even above that like a thousand rockets streaming skyward! And then the rolling flames which for a few seconds had curtained the whole horizon with the crimson fires of hell itself, vanished, to be succeeded instantly by a rapidly rising pillar of smoke boiling upward into the skies like a titanic geyser, shooting to a height of well over a mile in no time at all, there to mushroom widely out in all directions over the heavens.

As that pillar of smoke lifted lazily clear of the surface of the sea, there was the clear horizon again and no sign whatever of that ship, only the others steaming calmly on toward port with a wide gap in the line now where seconds before had been a ship like all the rest—a ship with all her crew rubbed out in a twinkling within easy sight of the harbor entrance after its battle of weeks across the Atlantic to get safely inside that final haven.

"Give her the gun, sergeant!" I gasped. "The *King Salvor*, four bells now!"

We shot down the precipitous incline, took the curves at the bottom on two wheels, covered the mile and a half down the pot-holed harbor road to the salvage quay as we had never before raced over it. Already, on the *King Salvor* mooring hawsers were flying off the bitts and going overboard, clouds of black smoke were beginning to pour from her stack, she was steaming up furiously. Harding and his whole crew had happened to be watching those inbound ships as well as I; they had seen it all.

I shouted to Harding on her bridge as the jeep jolted to a sudden stop alongside; he looked down, surprised to see me there.

"Hold her a minute, skipper!" I ordered. "I want to call the Port Captain first!"

Harding, about to cast loose, belayed the heaving overboard of the last lines. I dashed for the telephone in the salvage shack, called the Captain of the Port, reported the *King Salvor* ready to shove off immediately, asked for information.

I got it. The leading destroyer was just radioing in; in a minute they'd have the whole message; wait. The wait wasn't long; soon I had the word right from where that ship had been.

There was no use our going out; there wasn't a floating scrap visible anywhere of that vessel, the American Liberty ship *Arthur Middleton*, which had been laden with 5000 tons of ammunition. They were searching the waters surrounding the scene of the explosion for possible survivors; so far they had seen none. There was nothing to salvage; no assistance was needed nor could any be rendered; the *Arthur Middleton* and all her crew had just completely vanished.

With a heavy heart, I hung up the receiver. A large ship and

all her seamen, probably comprising a hundred men all told including the navy Armed Guard contingent on her, had disappeared before my eyes and nothing could be done about it. Half stunned, I went back to the quay, with that gap in the line of ships, more eloquent of what had happened than a thousand radio messages with details, indelibly burned into my memory.

"Belay everything, Harding!" I called out in a choking voice. "We're not going out. There's nothing left!"

But I found it wasn't as simple as all that. The *King Salvador's* deck force crowded about me, pleading for me to cast off. Surely, there was something they could do; they just couldn't let other seamen drown practically right under their noses without at least a try to help them. Sid Everett, Third Mate (soon to die himself in a flaming explosion inside another wreck), was nearly hysterical over not being permitted to go out. Harding personally had to drag him below to prevent him from casting off our last hawsers.

Surrounded by the tear-stained faces of those Englishmen I now knew so well from fighting by their sides on the *Strathallan*, I explained, argued, sympathized. What aid, if any, might be given to anybody found floating in the sea, would certainly be rendered by the destroyers we could see out there searching now. Another vessel tossed in among the searchers would only complicate matters, not help anybody. We weren't going out.

Sadly the little group of seamen dispersed, as stricken, each one of them, as if it had been his own brother he had just seen enveloped in that blazing inferno while he must stand idly by, impotent to help.

So started off a twenty-four-hour period which was wholly unbelievable. Immediately after the destruction of the *Arthur Middleton*, the British vice admiral in Mers-el-Kebir sent out a flotilla of six destroyers, all he had including those which had been guarding the convoy, to scour the seas off Oran. If a U-boat torpedo (though no one had seen a torpedo wake) had been responsible for setting off the cargo of ammunition in the *Arthur Middleton* and disintegrating her in a fraction of a second, then they were to find that U-boat no matter how long it took.

It didn't take long. I got another telephone call a few hours later

about the *King Salvador*, but only again to tell me not to bother about casting off with her. The U-boat had found the flotilla. A torpedo had exploded amidships against one of the destroyers. She had not the luck of the *Porcupine*. The explosion had broken her completely in two. Both halves had sunk in not much over a minute. One of the other destroyers had picked up what survivors there were and was on her way into Mers-el-Kebir with them. Meanwhile the remaining four destroyers were continuing the search.

I rubbed my aching head. What in God's name was the matter with the Asdic, that for a month now off Oran we had been subjected to a reign of terror, most likely all at the hands of the same U-boat? And not once (including this latest episode) had any Asdic ever made contact with that U-boat either before or after any torpedoing. There were the *Manxman*, the *Porcupine*, the *Strathallan*, the *Arthur Middleton*, now this last destroyer, and not a single contact! What was wrong?

One of my British shipmates at Mers-el-Kebir whom I went to see, immediately explained it to me; the explanation made me feel sicker than had my previous ignorance. We were all totally helpless to defend ourselves; the Asdic, any submarine detective device, was worthless in those waters; the British had known it for some time now and had hoped to keep the knowledge to themselves. But unfortunately this U-boat captain also had discovered it and had skill and courage enough to exploit his knowledge to the full. If only they could catch him on the surface, they'd polish him off in a hurry, but evidently he was too shrewd ever to give anybody an opportunity.

The difficulty was that we were having a most unusual winter that year in and off Oran. That I already knew; never had there been such cold rains and such mud. The weather had immobilized the army and the air force, but it had affected the undersea defense equipment even more. For the unprecedented winter had stratified the water in the Mediterranean thereabouts like a layer cake; there was a layer of water about a hundred feet thick on the surface with a layer below sharply differing from the top layer in temperature and as sharply separated from it as if they had been two entirely different liquids, oil and water, for instance.

The interface between the two layers was acting exactly like a mirror—the “ping” from the Asdic hitting it, bounced back towards the surface just as light waves are reflected back from a mirror, and the “ping” never penetrated to seek out the hull of a submarine swimming below the interface.

That U-boat captain operating off Oran had discovered this extraordinary situation and fashioned his tactics to suit. He stayed below the interface, safe from the Asdic, listening only for propeller noises from above. Whenever he heard what suited him, he maneuvered roughly for position well submerged below the interface, then rose swiftly to periscope depth, rectified his position for a shot, fired one torpedo only, and then, hit or miss (hit, usually) he plunged hurriedly down below the interface again, safe from detection even though a hundred destroyers with Asdics were searching for him.

He could keep it up till his torpedoes gave out; he must by now be reaching the end of the dozen or fourteen he carried. Then he would go home for more; if only some destroyer could knock him off before he started back to base with that deadly secret of his, the destroyer captain that did it would probably be made a Duke at least as a reward, so my informant told me. But it was highly unlikely he'd be caught off Oran. However, on his way home, after he left the peculiar waters of the Oran area, somebody might nail him. All hands in Mers-el-Kebir were praying for that; it was our only hope.

That was that; nothing could be done about it. Sunk in gloom, I drove back to Oran. By now it was night. Shortly I was in bed, trying to recuperate from what New Year's Day (and I hadn't had a single drink, either) had done to give me a splitting headache. But New Year's Day wasn't over yet.

Around 10 P.M., the telephone alongside my bed at the Grand Hotel woke me up. It was ringing violently. I grabbed off the receiver. What now?

It was the Captain of the Port's office. A big British transport, the *Empress of Australia*, loaded with troops for Oran, had tried to peel off in the night from an Algiers bound convoy. In the darkness with every ship blacked out another transport keeping on full speed

for Algiers had rammed her squarely as she made her turn and torn a big hole in her side. The *Empress of Australia* was flooding, in danger of capsizing, and with her engine power fast going and nearly all gone. For God's sake, get out there right away with the *King Salvor* and save her if possible. She was only a few miles out. There were no destroyers near by to take off troops; they were all far out at sea scouring it for that U-boat, hoping to catch her on the surface, charging batteries.

My jeep was always parked at night across from the hotel. I had a spare set of keys. I started hurriedly for the lower harbor.

The *King Salvor*, also alerted by the Port Captain's office, was for the second time that day steaming up furiously when I got alongside. Already all her lines were singled; no sooner had I hurdled the gunwale than the last lines went overboard and we were underway through the darkness, cautiously fingering out with our searchlight the marker buoys over the *Pigeon* and the *Spahi*.

Once clear of those, off went the searchlight and our little ship blacked out completely as we cleared the torpedo defense booms and nets and stood out in the night into the open sea. The waters outside Oran harbor were no place in which to make yourself any more conspicuous than need be; not with that fiendish U-boat somewhere about.

And then commenced another nightmare at sea in the darkness with a sinking ship. It was rough outside; wind and waves had kicked up; gone now was all the loveliness of sea and sky of the earlier New Year's Day.

About three miles due north, a vast shadow loomed up ahead of us in the night. That, no doubt, would be the *Empress of Australia*. She was, of course, totally blacked out also. We first ran down her port side, fairly close aboard, while Harding and I scanned that side through night glasses. What struck us instantly was that she had a startling list to starboard.

She was a big one, 22,000 tons. As we passed down her port side toward her stern, we got a good view of her profile against the night sky with her three enormous stacks standing boldly out. She was German-built, I knew; some years after World War I she had been constructed as part of the reparations due Britain. And that

was going to be bad. German designers had peculiar ideas. With them comfort for landlubberly passengers came before the utmost in safety. All German-built ships, like all French vessels, to make them slow rollers in a seaway, were highly unstable. When anything went wrong, they were likely to capsize on you at the slightest excuse, as had the *Normandie*. And this one had a dizzying list to starboard already; it looked bad.

To make matters worse, she had some four or five thousand soldiers aboard. We could see them even in the darkness jamming her topsides, all in lifebelts, and all probably wondering how soon they might be swimming. But up on the topsides, instead of down in the holds where they should have been, unfortunately they were all helping to make her topheavy and even more likely to capsize.

Frankly, however, no one could blame them for wanting to stay up on the open decks on that heavily listed ship. It would take far more discipline and better officers than raw troops ever possessed to drive them all down below into the holds, even though that added to their real safety. You could never make them see it. The topsides represented at least a chance to swim; the holds looked like nothing but rat traps with no escape if the ship capsized. So there they all were—between 400 and 500 tons of human ballast high up where it would do the most harm to the vanishing stability of the *Empress of Australia*.

The port side of her showed no damage. Satisfied of that, we swung the *King Salvador* under her high stern and headed up parallel to her on the other side to inspect for damage there before boarding. Hardly had we straightened away again, this time on the weather side, when the damage came into view—on her starboard quarter, a little aft her third stack, was a huge V-shaped gash in her steel side extending from her upper deck to well below her water-line. And that terrifying list to starboard was deeply submerging that wide open hole.

Very obviously she was steadily flooding aft, with the ocean pouring into her through that ugly gash. She was heeling constantly to starboard, with capsizing becoming ever more imminent. Her engine room, I knew, was filling; her boiler power was dying; with the last few pounds of steam left her she was slowly flounder-

ing shoreward through the night with her cargo of troops.

Before we could even get alongside in the rough seas which made maneuvering difficult, her feeble wake vanished altogether, her main engines gave out completely. She started to drift briskly down to leeward, broadside before a stiff northwest wind, her high sides acting as a beautiful set of sails.

Harding sheered off and circled to come up alongside her amidships to starboard, a little forward of the hole. She drifted sidewise away from him. He sheered off for another circle off her beam. Hardly had he started his turn away, when that vast bulk towering over our heads and leaning toward us, for no apparent reason at all suddenly rolled heavily to port, changing her list from her stricken side to her undamaged one. That promptly brought a great part of the open V, visible as an even blacker shadow against her black side, partly out of water.

"Thank God for that!" I murmured. "If only we can keep her that way, she'll be saved!"

Harding completed his second turn, swung the *King Salvor* hard in against the high side of the *Empress of Australia*. Someone above dropped him a line; I shouted upward through the gloom for a Jacob's ladder. Down it came. I told Harding to hang on there, started to climb myself. I struggled up the steep steel precipice clinging to that precarious ladder. At the rail the ship's First Officer and her Chief Engineer met me, all of us practically invisible to each other in the murk and all nearly lost immediately in a crowd of olive-drab soldiers packing the bulwarks.

The First Officer confirmed my suspicions that the ship was dead and drifting. They had been trying to make Mers-el-Kebir. The engines hadn't lasted. Could we in the *King Salvor* tow them the rest of the way in; it wasn't far now?

I told him, no. We couldn't, nobody could; not such a big ship. For Mers-el-Kebir was a difficult harbor for a large vessel; at night, an impossible one to tow into. But for God's sake, tell the captain to anchor instantly! The *Empress of Australia* was drifting straight down and that swiftly on the seaward breakwater fringing Oran harbor. They couldn't see it; it was low in the water and blacked out, but it was there in their lee. Not much longer now and their

helpless vessel would drift hard on the jagged rocks forming that long breakwater, to have her bottom torn wide open by the seas pounding her against the rocks the moment she grounded.

The First Officer ran for the bridge; in brief minutes I heard the chain cable of the *Empress of Australia* rattling out the hawse-pipe; a most welcome sound. One wreck hard on the beach, the *Thomas Stone*, was enough for me; I wanted no more.

I turned to the Chief Engineer, Henry Pratt, to congratulate him on a most brilliant stroke; rolling the *Empress of Australia* to port was exactly what she needed to help save her; nobody could have done it better; how had he achieved it?

His reply astonished me. He hadn't done it; he didn't know why it had happened; the ship had just rolled to port on her own. The ship was just highly unstable with all that free water in her; nobody could tell what she'd do next. She was quite as likely next second to list back to starboard again. She was listing from side to side like a drunken sailor; already several times she'd reversed her heel; only each time she'd listed over more than before. The next time to starboard might finish her for all anybody could tell; that hole in her side was going deeper under each time the starboard side heeled down.

"Come on, Pratt!" I said, forgetting all about the *King Salvor*. "Let's get below! We've got to hold her down to port this time and keep as much of that starboard hole out of water from now on as we can! Nothing else counts for anything!"

That Chief Engineer was good. We started. Immediately we were inside the superstructure, he switched on a pocket flashlight, began to guide me down the stairways in the passenger quarters, heading below. Not a pleasing prospect; while we were down there in her bowels, she might turn turtle on us. The topside was safer.

It was blacker inside the ship than on deck; a perfect blackout both inside and out. But why? She should be lighted up inside, especially now to facilitate the troops escaping.

"Where're all your lights?" I asked the Chief Engineer. "Why the blackout here, too?"

"Everything's dead!" he replied laconically. "After engine room's flooded, every bloody generator I've got's submerged down there;

there's no juice for anything; not a single lamp. All my electric auxiliaries are out too. No power for 'em. That's what's killed the boilers; can't get air to my boiler fires any more; the electric blowers are deader'n a kippered herring. And the lower part o' my engine room's flooded too; that finished the main engines even before they completely lost the steam. It's all a bloody mess!"

Well, it didn't make any difference whether she had power to steam any more; she wasn't going anywhere; she was anchored. And if that U-boat didn't come nosing too close inshore, there was nothing to worry about that way. All that mattered now was to keep her from capsizing. I hoped there'd be steam enough to run a few ship's pumps, but if not, Harding had plenty of portable salvage pumps right alongside. One way or another we'd make out for pumps if we needed them, but I wasn't worried about that.

For the only thing that concerned me was not to get any water out of her, but to get more water into her and that fast. It sounded suicidal and crazy to take a flooding ship and flood her some more, but it was her only hope. She must never list to starboard again! The only way to insure that was to flood so heavily some large port compartments that she stayed heeled hard down to port and the harder the better—it would lift more of that open hole in her starboard side out of water.

We did it. That Chief knew his business—a brave man and a capable one. Working by flashlight far down in the black cavern that was his main engine room, already flooded over the floor plates, and with the after engine room abaft us completely flooded to the height of the waterline far above and spurting sea water down on us through the badly strained bulkhead between, he and his engineer assistants started to flood empty port compartments, empty port double bottoms, empty port storerooms—everything to port still empty of sea water that we could get the sea into quickly. Meanwhile over our heads the water was coming through the hole and spreading forward and aft along the lower deck there. This inflow if free to flow to either side would ultimately destroy her stability and capsize her. But now it also all ran to port as we heeled her down, and all of it helped to hold her there.

I suggested to the Chief that it would be a good idea also to

flood his port shaft alley—that shaft alley would take a lot of water very low down, add to our stability, and help considerably to hold us over. He agreed; he started to flood it, only to find to his amazement, he couldn't—it was already solidly flooded! Apparently the shaft alley sliding watertight door had not been seated tightly or something else had leaked and that shaft alley (thank God it wasn't the starboard one) had already flooded from the lower engine room. It must have been that which had given her the port list just before I came aboard!

We worked all night. We got her so well down to port all hell couldn't have listed her back to starboard again. And we lifted the gash in her starboard side (it came abreast the after engine room) so far out of water that with the little head of steam the Chief Engineer could maintain with next to no air going to his boilers, we were able to keep up with all the fresh inflow from the sea. We sluiced it through a partly opened sliding watertight door from the wholly flooded after engine room, to come pouring like Niagara into the partly flooded main engine room, a hair-raising sight. There the huge condenser circulating pump, running all out, managed to suck it up and push it overboard again as fast as it came in.

Dawn came at last on January 2. The ship was heavily heeled down to port and looked terrible, but looks didn't matter; she was safe. Slowly the anchor was heaved in by the steam-starved anchor windlass.

Then with a stout hawser from her bow, the *King Salvador* took station out ahead of her, and with every French tug in Oran alongside pushing also, proudly dragged the towering *Empress of Australia* the last few miles through the sea to Mers-el-Kebir. Then came the tortuous and difficult passage amongst the torpedo-defense nets into Mers-el-Kebir harbor, past the submerged and capsized hulk of the French battleship *la Bretagne*, till at last she was pushed by the puffing tugs gently up against the quay, starboard side to, safe finally with all her troops! After that, while we all watched, the *Empress of Australia* disembarked them alongside the quay there, exactly on her original schedule; over four thousand soldiers more and all their equipment, for Eisenhower's build-up to meet the rising threat of von Arnim and Rommel in Tunisia!

Hastily I got Lieutenant Ankers and some of his divers over from the *Spahi*. We worked all the rest of that day while the troops were disembarking and all night too and part of the next day. When finally on January 3 we finished, we had a heavy temporary wood patch (built by divers over the underwater part of the hole) all set as a watertight cofferdam for Commander Bell's shore party to pour a thick concrete patch completely up to her main deck. And we had all the water pumped out of her so once more she was dry, stable, and on an even keel. With the work the shore repair gang would shortly do to clean up her machinery, pour concrete, and install a temporary diesel electric generator, she could steam full speed back to England for permanent repairs.

With that, I went back to my room at the Grand Hotel and crawled into bed. It had been a long New Year's Day.

33

JANUARY 4 CAME. ANKERS AND ALL

his divers were back at the harbor entrance. Their diving float now more resembled a factory construction site; two power-driven mixers were busily mixing concrete. Into their churning maws went bag after bag of quick-setting cement, gravel by the ton, crushed rock almost in mountains, all generously seasoned with fresh water. Thirty tons, all told, of concrete went down through the sea into that patch to seal the cavity the *Ardois* had left in the upper side of the *Spahi*.

Down below, divers spread the concrete as it came down to them in the form they had built, as usual cursing fluently all the while the pilot, the *Commandant du Port*, the *Ardois*, and those Americans who might have stopped the *Ardois* but hadn't. My impression, listening on the diving telephones, was that for each ton of concrete we sent down, we got back from below at least another ton of heartfelt imprecations. But neither I nor Ankers said anything—divers on a wreck must have some release for their emotions or they'll crack up.

By noon, we had all the concrete leveled off below. The divers came up, the topside crew turned to to clear away the mess the mixers and the materials had made of the float. We had nothing more to do now save to wait a few days for the cement to harden so we could start the lifting operation. All the 500 hogsheads of wine required to be removed (plus a few dozens more for safety) were already safely ashore under guard in the warehouse.

January 5 we spent in rigging air hoses to the various compartments of the *Spahi*, all running below to her from a single control

manifold on the diving float. Meanwhile, the *King Salvador* began to rig herself for her part. The long idle air compressors were once again lifted off the quay to her decks, secured there, tested out, piped up to supply the air. Harding broke out his heaviest towing hawsers—steel cables thick as a man's wrist, which were to be used in towing the *Spahi* clear. Reitzel arranged for a few French tugs to help.

At last came January 7, the day on which we were to put all to the touch. Very early, all hands, men and ships, took station. But January 7 was such a day as I had never seen before in any climate, in any season. The heavens opened to send down such a downpour as no one there had ever witnessed. It seemed to be coming down in a solid mass, no separate raindrops at all distinguishable. You could practically swim in it.

In no time at all, the whole harbor area was flooded solidly with all traffic halted. From one vast lake ashore, the overflow poured in a continuous waterfall more than six inches thick over the quays into the harbor like a river going over a spillway several miles long. That kept up all through the day; it seemed that the skies were determined to wash Oran completely into the Mediterranean.

Drenched in spite of raincoats and boots, we all took our stations. The *King Salvador* lay close by the bow of the *Spahi*, her air hoses running to the control manifold on diving float, hawsers secured from her stern to the bow of the sunken *Spahi*, more hawsers run out from her bow to the salvage quay a quarter of a mile off toward which we should tow the lifted *Spahi*.

With great difficulty we finally got all the watersoaked portable air compressors going, the *King Salvador* started up her own compressors below, and we began to pump compressed air. Some hours went by. With all those compressors pounding, the *King Salvador* sounded like a boiler factory. On the diving float, Ankers and I took the air from her, distributed it from the control manifold to hose lines to the wreck below, watched the few pressure gauges we had. Wet, cold, miserable, nearly drowned, we stayed there in the open, tending the air manifold, while all about us, seeking what little shelter could be improvised out of tarpaulins, were the rest of the salvage crew, just as miserable, standing by for eventualities.

The hours dragged along, the compressors throbbed, we tended the manifold, and all the while we shivered in the cold flood. It seemed incomprehensible that mere clouds could ever hold that much water; I could have sworn that somehow the whole Mediterranean outside the harbor was being pumped skyward in a solid mass to be dumped on us there inside.

A little before noon, the pressure gauges showed we had driven the water down inside the *Spahi*'s holds so that shortly something should rise. No ship can ever be raised evenly; one end or the other will come up first, no matter how fine the control. And our control I knew was very crude; I wasn't even going to attempt it. I elected to raise the bow first, then the stern, then to tow the whole wreck, still lying half-capsized on its starboard side, toward the shore out of the channel, and sink her where she could never again interfere with the entrance. After that, once the war was over, if the French wanted either the rest of those hogsheads of wine or the *Spahi* herself, they were welcome to do what they pleased with her.

So far all was going well; the leakage of air from the submerged *Spahi* was negligible; our big concrete patch was holding splendidly. I shut off the compressed air to the stern, put everything we had into the bow, and particularly into the forepeak tank, to raise the bow end first.

It worked. In a few minutes more, the hoses to the bow started to slack off and rise in snaky coils undulating on the surface. A few seconds later, there was the bow of the *Spahi*, looking like the rounded side of a whale, bobbing on the surface of the sea, only a few feet above water!

That was fine. Now for the stern, and the job was done. I quit blowing air forward, sent every cubic foot of compressed air we had aft and amidships to raise the after end.

But that didn't work. Apparently with the vessel on a steep slant now, bow up, stern down, the athwartship bulkheads weren't tight enough to hold the air in the compartments aft into which it was being pumped. The air leaked forward and uphill; soon we saw as much air bubbling up through the sea in line with the forward cargo hatches as we were pumping down into the stern compartments. I had always suspected those ancient bulkheads as being

practically worthless for watertightness or airtightness—now they were proving it. It was no go. I had to give up.

But, I thought, it might be possible to do it if we reversed the process; that is, if we raised her stern first. So I tried that. I quit pumping air down below altogether, and instead opened wide the vent valves to the floating bow to let the compressed air there escape to the atmosphere and the sea to flood it again.

Soon we saw the bow of the *Spahi* disappear beneath the sea. Shortly it hit bottom again. With that, I sealed off the bow air lines and started once more to pump air down to the stern. In no very long time, the stern floated up, exposing part of her propeller as well as her starboard counter.

Now for the bow once more. Again all the air was shifted forward to lift that. But it no more worked that way than in reverse. The bow didn't rise; instead all the air leaked aft and began to escape from the after cargo hatches.

There in that pouring rain, I gazed at the stern of the *Spahi* and cursed her fluently for a leaky tub which should have been sent to the boneyard decades before.

But that was all the good it did me. Several times more I juggled that ship, seesawing her up and down, first one end up, then the other, but never could I get both ends up together. She just wouldn't hold air well enough.

Finally I gave up trying. My job was to open the harbor of Oran and I wasn't tied down as to how I did it. I sank the *Spahi* again entirely and sent Ankers away with a pair of French tugs to get a 100-ton floating French crane that belonged in the harbor, the only crane left afloat in the place. Shortly he was back with it.

We towed the crane into place over the once again sunken bow of the fully submerged *Spahi*; the divers went down and secured the crane hook to the heavy towing bridle we already had around the *Spahi*'s bow. Then I ordered the crane crew to take their maximum lift and they started to heave till their full 100-ton pull was being exerted. With that pull for insurance to make certain the *Spahi* didn't develop any idiosyncrasies and roll upright on us to spill out all the air during what was to follow, again I blew air into the bow, lightening it till the crane was just able to pull it to the

surface, leaving the ship with her stern down and as a whole somewhat negatively buoyant this time.

When once again the bow showed above the sea, we went to work to pull the stopper out of the harbor bottleneck. I had no further idea of trying to raise the stern. Instead, with the *King Salvador* heaving on hawsers to the *Spahi*'s bow and to that floating crane over it, we started to swing the *Spahi*'s bow inboard into the inner harbor, letting her pivot on her sunken stern like a gate.

Round she came, smoothly and slowly, for I had no desire by rushing matters to tip her so she might spill trapped air out her cargo hatches and get heavy enough again to tear away from us.

In the midst of all that, the rain turned suddenly to hail! Down came that hail in stones big enough to knock us all dizzy in no time at all, if, as always, we hadn't had our tin hats handy. On they went; after that, to the rattling of shrapnel from the heavens on our tin roofs, we proceeded.

We got the *Spahi* swung round a good 90°, opening wide the harbor gate. For good measure, we swung her about 20° more. After that, the *King Salvador* went full out on everything she had—full ahead on her propeller, winching in meanwhile full power on the hawsers she had over her bow to the quay a quarter of a mile ahead. With all that, caring no longer what the *Spahi* did nor what happened to her, we dragged her by main strength along the bottom, sliding her submerged stern through the mud till finally she stuck and would budge no further shoreward. When that occurred, we slacked away on the crane, released the air from her bow, and for the last time let her bow sink again. All hands had had enough of her and everything connected with her—the *Ardois*, the *Commandant du Port*, his French pilot. With no tears at all to mark her going, Ankers and his men and all the others who had had their very hearts torn out struggling with that wreck, watched the *Spahi* take her final plunge and disappear.

Oran harbor was wholly open at last. A wide channel, full depth, existed again. Anything could come through now—completely loaded Liberties, even the *Queen Elizabeth* with 12,000 troops, if they cared to send her to Oran.

Hardly had the last curve of the *Spahi*'s bow disappeared beneath

the sea than I was headed shoreward through the rain and hail to breast my way through the lake between the quay and the telephone in the salvage shack and radio the news to Algiers. The major mission for which I had been brought from the Red Sea to Algeria was accomplished.

No more *Spahi!* I felt as intoxicated as if I had myself swallowed the entire contents of one of those huge hogsheads of wine!

C H A P T E R

34

I GAZED SPECULATIVELY OVER THE remaining collection of wrecks in Oran harbor. Only the Grand Dock now was of major importance to the war effort. Captain Reed and his international assortment of divers would take care of that dock. Now Lieutenant Ankers and his men could move on to Algiers and go to work on the *Thomas Stone*. In that, they should need the *King Salvor* also.

I issued the orders. Captain Harding began to collect his gear to steam east; Ankers and his men started to tear down their salvage shack and to pack their slight equipment to go with him. Lieutenant Reitzel had at last been detached from his former nominal assignment and officially turned over to the Salvage Forces. I ordered him to proceed with them to Algiers also and set up an office in the St. George for Allied Salvage Headquarters from which, I hoped, all our future operations might shortly be directed.

The little expedition steamed out of the harbor, all happy to see the last of Oran. For a sailor, for anybody, Algiers was an exotic city to be remembered—Oran was merely a large collection of docks, of dismal streets, and of unattractive synthetic redheads, who in spite of an infinite number of beauty parlors, offered slight attraction to a seaman on liberty.

I turned to on the Grand Dock with no rest interval available for me after the *Spahi*. For Bill Reed and his crew had been going at that scuttled dry dock like demons, trying to break their Massawa records. They had it nearly all sealed up; in a few days more we might attempt to raise it.

A vast amount of preparatory work had been done. My major

worry over the Grand Dock originally had been where we might get compressors enough to supply the tremendous quantity of air we should need. But I had found some time back I might have spared myself the concern—it was simply answered. That abortive salvage job, *la Bretagne*, to which I had so rudely put a period, filled the need. Looking that capsized battleship over in Mers-el-Kebir, I had discovered something. Months before D-day, with the blessings of the Nazi Control Commission which no doubt had hoped ultimately to profit thereby either with *la Bretagne* as a re-fitted Axis battleship or as a source of scrap steel, Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard had been permitted to transfer from a power house ashore some ancient but very large electrically driven air compressors, together with a few newer sizable diesel-powered sets. All these Perrin-Trichard had long since fitted up inside a huge floating barge, forming a clumsy but powerful portable compressor plant, which had been moored over the capsized *la Bretagne* pending the day he might be ready to try to float her.

All that was required was to tow Perrin-Trichard's massive air factory from over the wreck of *la Bretagne* at Mers-el-Kebir, to the inside of Oran harbor and connect it to the power mains on the breakwater near by. That was swiftly done; through the courtesy of the Nazis and *la Bretagne*, our needs were beautifully taken care of.

We worked feverishly the next few days over the final sealing up. Buck Scougal and Al Watson performed wonders in snaking themselves through that dry dock into submerged death traps so tight-fitting around a diving rig the French divers threw up their hands in horror at the mere thought of wedging themselves or anybody else into them. But time and again Buck and Al went in, worming themselves inside vertical steel shafts so small they could neither use a sledge nor bend over, and had to drive in wood plugs standing straight up in their diving rigs, using their lead-soled diving boots as hammers.

However, one thing which I desperately needed for the task, I couldn't get. That was a set of fifty low pressure gauges with large scale dials, so I might read accurately within half a pound the air pressure inside each compartment of the Grand Dock as we pushed

compressed air into it and forced the water out. If ever I was to know the water level in each compartment, to control the lifting operation safely, I had to have those fifty low pressure gauges.

I had struggled for weeks getting those gauges. There were none in Oran, there were none in Algeria. I tried the British; they had none in Africa, in Gibraltar, in England. Finally in desperation I had a long cable dispatch prepared, setting forth the need, asking that fifty such gauges be shipped us immediately by air from the United States. There, I knew, there must be gauges of all kinds by the thousands; all assigned, no doubt, in a wartime construction program, but where could there be greater immediate need or more to be gained than on the Grand Dock?

I might as well have saved loading up the undersea cables with my message—I got the expected answer—there were no unassigned gauges in America; if we wanted any, we should look to the British; the Mediterranean was an area of British responsibility. With a heavy heart I tore into fine bits my copy of that answer and threw them into the harbor. Whose responsibility was it anyway to keep the damaged ships afloat and repaired, so that Eisenhower might have ammunition and supplies enough to prevent American soldiers from being massacred in Tunisia by Axis generals who were totally unconcerned over paper trifles regarding areas of responsibility?

But there was nothing further I could do about it. I must either abandon lifting the Grand Dock and with that abandonment all chance of repairing large ships torpedoed in our area, or go at it practically blind with no gauges to control the operation—for such a huge mass of submerged steel, no very alluring prospect. However, it was that or nothing; I decided to undertake it, proper gauges or no gauges.

So on the morning of January 11, three weeks to the day after my eight-man crew from Massawa began working on it, we started on the lifting of the Grand Dock.

From Perrin-Trichard's floating air compressor plant, six massive hoses led over the water to the air manifolds connected to each section of the involved grid of piping laid out on the ocean floor with individual connections from the manifolds to each of the fifty

flooded compartments below. I had only half a dozen high pressure gauges which were all I could steal off machinery here and there in Oran, all unsuitable for the task, all inaccurate for low pressure work, totally inadequate in number for the job. But they were a little something. With them I could get a foggy idea of what was going on below; about as good an idea as a surgeon might get who had a delicate brain operation to perform but who was compelled to work with an almost opaque pair of dark glasses over his eyes while he sawed away on his patient's skull, uncertain as to whether he was still working on the top of the cranium or had already cut through to the chin.

We pumped air down into that unseen dry dock all day long. I had only the vaguest notion of how much water we were pushing out of any given compartment below. But one thing I knew very well—I must get one end of that immense U-shaped dry dock lifted far above the surface and well dried out to give it stability before the other end started to rise. Otherwise the whole dry dock, with both ends off the bottom at once and a great deal of free water swashing about inside it, would certainly capsize on us on its way up through the deep water, and become a second *Normandie*, a total loss, not only for this war but probably forever because the water there was so deep.

That hazard at least I could avoid. By keeping one end of the dock too heavy to float while I pumped compressed air into the other end, I could be sure the end I wanted would come up first so I could thoroughly free it of water before raising the other and heavier end. The drawback to all that was that the heavy end, once the dry dock was on a tilt, might be *too* heavy, with more weight resting on its submerged lower edge than it could safely carry in that position without damage. That was what the low pressure gauges were for—to make certain the low end was not light enough to float up too soon, nor so heavy on the bottom as to cause damage to the airtightness of the dock and perhaps prevent the low end from ever rising. But I didn't have the gauges.

The air compressors throbbed, the air hoses writhed in the sea, the compressed air whistled through them on its way down into the dry dock, and I stood in a small boat moving slowly about over

the water, gazing at gauges which gave me no reliable information, guessing at what was going on down below and hoping for the best.

About the middle of the afternoon, while I was still certain there wasn't air enough below to raise either end yet, but hoped there was enough already down to lighten the bow end sufficiently for safety while I raised the stern end, I quit altogether pumping air down to the bow. From then on, I sent all I had aft to the stern end, desirous of raising that end first.

The hours dragged along. Over the surface of the sea, Captain Reed and Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard went in other small boats from manifold to manifold, anxiously scanning the dials of the six high pressure gauges we had, getting no better knowledge from them than I had. The needles on those stiff-springed gauges wouldn't even start to indicate the pound or two of difference in pressure that meant to us the whole difference between success and disaster. We kept on pumping compressed air.

We had our reward. As night fell over Oran harbor, the air hoses to the stern compartments began to slack away. Slowly, ponderously, like leviathan himself rising from the deep, the stern of the Grand Dock broke surface—first the huge steel side walls forming the sides of the U, like two immense sunken buildings, starboard and port, burst through to rise steadily and continuously till they towered forty feet above the sea, then the wide flat deck of the dry dock itself emerged to greet our entranced eyes. I took a deep breath. Half our task was done—now for the second and more difficult half!

Darkness had fallen. Hurriedly we boarded that floating stern, strung temporary electric wires all over it to light the job, then went to work with all hands, French and American alike. There was much to do. We closed off opened flood valves through which water had been expelled from aft. We unbolted manhole covers in the now exposed deck of the dock, trundled around heavy salvage pumps which the *King Savior* had left us, dropped suction hoses down into the vast caverns fifteen feet deep forming the bottom compartments of the Grand Dock, sucked out the deep pools of water which the compressed air had failed to expel from them. Gradually, as we got rid of that water, the stern rose higher and higher above the sea.

By midnight, the drying out job was done. Every compartment we could get to with a salvage pump was dried out and resealed. My slide rule, working overtime, indicated to me from my computations that we had stability enough—the dry dock couldn't possibly capsize now when we finally lifted the bow off bottom and she came freely afloat once more.

With that, all the compressed air we had was turned into the still submerged sections, amidships of the dock and at the bow. I figured it should take at most four hours more to float the bow; less, I earnestly hoped. But it was with a very heavy heart that I went about it.

For as night finally fell on Oran, the weather which had been good all day, took a marked turn for the worse. By ten o'clock, as we still struggled with our salvage pumps in the drying out, it was blowing a gale. Long before midnight, when at last we might start on the lifting of the bow, we were caught in a storm with whitecaps running all over the harbor, and the just-lifted stern of the Grand Dock rising and falling heavily to the waves breaking over its deck like a ship at sea.

I could visualize the submerged bow of that dock below me working like a hinge on the bottom, taking now not only the whole weight of that end of the dock, whatever it might be, but also the thunderous jolts coming through the steel structure as the floating end plunged up and down in the seaway. How much weight was there still on that submerged and grounded end, battering it on the bottom? I didn't know. God help us now! No one else could.

At midnight I was able at last to swing open the air valves once more, to send all the air we could possibly get out of our compressors down to the sunken bow to lighten it up and relieve the strain on it, and, I hoped, finally to float it up. I began to pray.

Steadily all through the rest of the night we pumped down air. The weary hours dragged along in darkness and in storm. As best we could, all of us huddled now on the lifted floor of the stern of the dry dock, tried to shield ourselves behind keel blocks from the green seas and the heavy spray breaking continuously over the low deck, praying for the storm which was battering our dock to die away, praying for the bow to rise, praying for the dawn.

Only the dawn came at last to answer our prayers. The storm did not abate, the bow did not rise. Instead, in the growing light illuminating the turbulent waters of the harbor, we saw amongst the waves a sight to numb our very souls—there over the sunken bow, the whole area of the sea was one white mass of frothing bubbles bursting through the surface. All the compressed air we were pumping down into the bow was leaking out and rising as fast as we pushed it down!

Glumly we looked at that—elderly Captain Reed, young Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard, all the divers, French and American alike, who had struggled to lift that dry dock. Without a word of discussion, all hands knew the answer—the bow end of the dock was somehow damaged, it was no longer airtight, it wasn't going to rise.

Perrin-Trichard's French divers were still in the best shape physically. One of them was dressed, lowered away from a small boat in the stormy waves over the sunken bow to learn more exactly what had happened twelve fathoms down below and what, if anything, might be done to cure it.

He was down about half an hour. He rose, was dragged into the boat, was partly undressed. In excited French, using both arms even more than his tongue, he started to tell Perrin-Trichard what he had found. As rapidly as possible, as his wildly gesticulating diver poured out his story, Perrin-Trichard translated to Reed and to me.

The Grand Dock was irretrievably ruined. It would never be lifted now. The overhanging bow section of the dry dock, protruding sixty feet beyond the high side walls, must have been resting too heavily on the bottom. Under the pounding it was getting from the sea, it had buckled athwartships all the way across the dock from starboard to port, a distance of 140 feet, its full width, right at the point where the vertical side walls ended. There was a very bad wrinkle across the dock there in the heavy steel plating of the deck. That wrinkle had opened up every joint it crossed in the steel deck plates and thousands of rivets besides. Air was pouring out along the line of that wrinkle in vast quantities. There were innumerable leaks all the way from one side of the dock across to the other.

The diver stopped waving his arms. His tale was told. His tenders began to get him out of the rest of his diving rig.

Silently Reed and Perrin-Trichard, who together had supervised all the preliminary work on the Grand Dock, looked at each other and then both looked at me. Their conclusions were as visible in their woebegone faces as if they had spent an hour in expounding them. That French seaman who had just come up to report was a reliable diver; what he said, we could accept as so. All those bubbles on the water roundabout us in the boat confirmed him.

The dock was ruined in tightness. We couldn't raise it, at least not without a far more extensive diving job on it to seal all these new leaks than we had already gone through on that dock; it would take months yet. And we couldn't do that—all our few divers had reached the end of their string; they must have a long rest now before they could tackle a major job in deep water again. We might as well sink the stern we had afloat before worse happened, and call it a day. We could do nothing else.

I shook my head. I did not concur.

"Keep the compressors going, Lieutenant," I said to Perrin-Trichard. "She'll come up yet."

We kept on pumping. The morning faded away to afternoon. Still we kept on pumping. Nothing happened. We had pounded down enough compressed air into that bow to have floated it up six times over, but it didn't rise; it was plainly obvious to all that the air was leaking out as fast as it went down.

The storm moderated, the seas died down, but that no longer made a difference. The damage was done. As the afternoon wore away, Lieutenant Perrin-Trichard, who possibly at first may have thought I had a trump up my sleeve, lost all hope, and suggested we shut down. I refused. We kept on pumping.

Night fell again. Still nothing happened, the bow showed not the slightest sign of rising. Captain Reed gave up. It was no longer any use. While we still had a few men, bedraggled though all of us were, on our feet, we might as well sink the stern and call it off. We had done the best we could with the equipment we had been given. We had failed. It wasn't our fault.

I refused. We kept on pumping. Down went the air through the

pulsating hose lines, up it came again through the sea in vast masses of bubbles as fast as we pounded it down. But I had seen strange things happen in salvage; it would take a miracle now to lift the Grand Dock, but I had faith a miracle could happen to save us. Everything I could do myself to lift the Grand Dock had been done; there was nothing further I could do except to keep on pumping air and have faith. I kept on pumping.

Under the weird light of the few electric bulbs we had illuminating the canyon between the side walls of the dock, Reed came to me again. His men were all practically dead; so was he. Did I object if they all went ashore to try to get a night's rest? I had no objection. I knew they needed it. So did I. They went ashore. So did most of Perrin-Trichard's men, except Perrin-Trichard himself—he was young. Perrin-Trichard and I picked out some coils of wet hawsers on the dock floor. We would sleep there. After assuring myself that Perrin-Trichard had relief engineers enough in the compressor barge to keep on going, and warning him the compressors must not stop, I crawled on top my coiled down hawser and curled up myself.

The compressors kept on pounding, more audible now in the quietness of the night. Nothing happened to that canted dry dock. The hours dragged along, midnight came again. I couldn't sleep. For the first time, I felt like going to Admiral Cunningham and throwing up my command; I was through; I couldn't stand any more. None of this need ever have happened; a few gauges, not over a thousand dollars' worth, would have avoided it all. I was sick of working in an area of British responsibility, a complete orphan so far as America and its tremendous war resources were concerned; I was sick of everything; I'd had enough. In the morning, I should do it. Let them get someone else to try to make for them bricks without straw. I couldn't any longer; I was through helping to kill off other men trying it.

The compressors kept on pounding, the air whistled down, somewhere forward of me, I could hear it gurgling upward through the sea. Nothing was happening, nothing now could happen to the bow of the Grand Dock to lift it. Finally the medley of unceasing noises put me to sleep.

Dawn broke again, the third day now. Across the water came the hammering of the air compressors, near by was that everlasting foaming on the sea where the air was bubbling up, nothing had changed. I rolled stiffly off the top of the coiled hawser.

A small boat soon brought back Captain Reed and all his men, all the French contingent. They boarded the floating stern of the dock, looked eagerly forward at the marker poles sticking up through the sea over the sunken bow for any sign of its having risen a little during the night. There wasn't any symptom of a rise; not the slightest. Apathetically they broke up into small groups to wander disconsolately over the steeply sloping deck at the stern.

We kept on pumping. But nobody had any hope any more, save I, who, wholly without reason for it, now that it was day again began once more to hope and to pray for a miracle. The morning dragged along. The men looked at me curiously as they passed near the coil of rope against which I leaned, too tired to stand upright any more. How much longer did I mean to keep up this useless pumping? If any one of them had dared ask me directly, I couldn't have answered him.

Midmorning came. My eyes, as nearly always, were fixed on the marker pole rising through the sea over the starboard side of the sunken bow. It seemed to stir a trifle. I rubbed my haggard eyes to clear them a little, looked again. Yes, undoubtedly it seemed to me to be wavering a bit. But I doubted my eyes—they were worn and red and bloodshot from lack of sleep and plenty more besides these last three days. Reed was near by; I asked him to look.

But there was no longer any need of confirmation. When I turned back again, that pole *was* rising, and I could feel the steel floor of the dock under my feet moving also.

Very slowly, that pole and its mate to port rose through the sea to be followed at constantly increasing speed by the high steel sides and then by the massive bow of the Grand Dock. In seconds thereafter, there was the Grand Dock, fully afloat from end to end in all its majestic bulk, overshadowing all else in Oran harbor, lazily rocking on the surface, risen at last from the depths!

A prayer of thanksgiving poured from my heart. I *had* witnessed a miracle.

35

THE GRAND DOCK CAME UP ON JANUARY 13. Two days later, I was back in Algiers, with the urgent salvage work in Oran all completed except for the raising of the Moyen Dock, on which Reed was to start next.

Reitzel, now officially Executive Officer, already had an office set up for our salvage headquarters in the St. George; a bare room across the hall and a few doors down from the office of the Admiral of the Fleet. Ours was the only office on that long corridor holding Americans. All the others on both sides of the hall housing the naval staff contained only British officers and their office personnel, mainly Wrens, the British equivalent of our Waves.

I looked at my new office. It was completely bare of everything—bare walls, bare windows, bare floor—a totally barren room except for a telephone, a battered desk and three rickety chairs Reitzel had managed to procure, and a portable typewriter which was his personal property. We needed another piece of furniture. Out of a few rough boards and with the assistance of a British marine, we knocked together a long table on which we might spread out plans of damaged ships (if we ever got any plans).

Finally there was only one thing more necessary for a really efficient office—someone to do the office work and answer our telephone when both Reitzel and I were out. I looked around Allied Headquarters. It was hopeless to expect a navy yeoman; Jerry Wright, liaison officer, had the only one in Algiers. I asked the army; after all we were running a co-ordinated war. Could the army give me anything from a private, second class, up to a sergeant, who could handle our simple office work, and possibly also type a report?

I learned the army hadn't a single man who had ever even looked through an office door, who wasn't already battling with the mountains of reports in the adjutant's offices; they couldn't spare one. But, the adjutant assured me, they were anxious to help; salvage meant something to the army. That day a company of WACs, the very first to be sent to Africa, was arriving in Algiers; sorely as the strictly army paper war required the services of all of them, I should be assigned a WAC for Salvage Headquarters. I thanked the adjutant wholeheartedly; it was obvious to me how much it meant to him to release even one WAC.

Next morning our WAC reported. Reitzel introduced her to the portable typewriter, instructed her in the simple routine of our new office. He carefully impressed on her that her number one job was answering the telephone and swiftly getting hold of him or me, wherever we might be in Africa, whenever a new wreck was reported.

She turned to on the typewriter to copy a brief longhand report on the raising of the Grand Dock. It was evident she was only a so-so typist; I sighed and hoped she might show at least average intelligence when it came to the telephone. I turned to studying the problem of the *Thomas Stone*.

Several hours later, the first report was typed; it was passable. More to make conversation than otherwise, and to make this girl just dumped down in Africa feel a little more at ease, I asked perfunctorily where she came from. She told me.

Her answer took all the perfunctoriness out of my question.

"Well, isn't that fine!" I replied. "Your town's hardly ten miles from my own home; I've been through there often. Maybe I know your friends there?"

But her face fell. Apparently she didn't consider it so fine. To come all the way from the Atlantic seaboard to Africa and then to find herself assigned to the office of a middle-aged and cadaverous-looking captain who lived only ten miles away from her own parents, took all the romance out of war. She made no comment at all.

Lunch time came. Our WAC went. Lunch time was over. Our WAC didn't come back. I gave her a couple of hours' leeway to get back on the job, then called up the head WAC, a sergeant, to find

out what had happened to our new office force. Didn't the WACs have any better discipline than to join immediately The Three Hours For Lunch Club?

I learned from the head WAC that our WAC had reported herself as not elated over her assignment with the navy; she thought she might do more effective work elsewhere, preferably on strictly army matters.

Huh, I grunted. So I hadn't misinterpreted that look when my WAC discovered I lived practically next door to her family.

The head WAC continued. I was not to worry. She would consider carefully all the girls she had in her company, and I could rest assured that tomorrow morning I should have another WAC. It was too late anyway that afternoon to send me a replacement. Could I get along till tomorrow? I thanked her, told her I'd try. And inasmuch as I'd managed to survive with no help at all since coming to Algeria, I thought the chances of holding out through one more afternoon were fair.

Next morning came. Shortly after Reitzel and I, who were very early birds, had unlocked the room and started working, in came our new helper. I looked up.

A right hand swung smartly up in the most military salute I'd ever received, a musical voice announced,

"Private Stacy reporting for duty, sir."

I stared at Private Stacy. Lovely blond hair protruding in intriguing curls beneath her military cap, a slim figure strikingly set off by her uniform, a complexion such as women spend fortunes at Elizabeth Arden's trying to achieve, sparkling eyes—a beautiful girl if I'd ever seen one. I looked her over glumly; no girl with all that would ever be worth a damn doing prosaic salvage office work or hammering a typewriter. I sighed; no help after all; war was certainly hell.

Gruffly I indicated the portable typewriter. She removed her cap, revealed fully her honey-colored hair (all natural, too), and once again Reitzel turned to explaining what our office work required. She could start by typing from my crude longhand notes a detailed inventory of the salvage equipment—pumps, hoses, compressors, diving rigs—we had scattered over Algeria from Oran to Bône.

I went back to studying the *Thomas Stone*. Reitzel went out. She started typing.

By and by the steady rhythm of typewriter keys and of her flying fingers began to penetrate my concentration on the *Thomas Stone*. The girl was good as well as good-looking—she was an excellent typist and she was certainly exceptionally intelligent too—confronted by a technical list of wholly unfamiliar machinery and strange terms, she was arranging and hammering it out without constantly asking me a myriad of questions, or indeed, any at all. Apparently she was just as good as a helper as she might be as an illustration on a magazine cover.

Well, I figured, I might as well know the worst. If it turned out that she too lived only a few streets away from me back in the U.S., she was bound to learn of it soon anyway, and I'd be out a second WAC, a good one this time. So I interrupted her.

"Where're you from, Miss Stacy?" I asked.

It was all right. She was from Honolulu—about as far from my town as possible, and still be under the American flag.

"So you must have been there Pearl Harbor day?" I quizzed her.

Yes, she'd been there the day the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor and seen the aftermath of that massacre; she'd joined the WACs as soon thereafter as there were any WACs to join; she had a brother in the army fighting in the Southwest Pacific with MacArthur, where things were pretty tough. She went back to her typing; I leaned back in my flimsy chair and, much relieved, went back to considering the case of the *Thomas Stone*. I wasn't going to have this girl walk out on me. She was good, and to her the war had a deep personal meaning; it was evident if she'd been put to scrubbing floors, so long as it might help the war effort, she'd scrub them cheerfully, and clean too.

Soon thereafter I went out, first informing Miss Stacy of where to look for me if the phone rang. The corridor, not very wide, was crowded with Royal Navy personnel; I had to elbow my way through to get to the stairs on my way to Jerry Wright's office, where I hoped to pick up some recent information on Algiers.

About half an hour later, I came back. Scarcely had I descended the last stair to my own floor, when out of an office near by popped

Captain Shaw, R.N., one of Cunningham's top aides, to button-hole me. Evidently he'd warned the Royal Marine on sentry duty there to inform him the instant I hove in sight again. What ship's stopped a torpedo this time, I wondered?

"What's wrong now?" I asked him.

"Cast your eyes on that!" he replied, pointing down the hall. I looked. "You see that mob in front of your office?" I saw it, all right, the same crowd I'd elbowed my way through on my way out without paying any particular attention to it then. But it was still there, only bigger now.

"See here, Ellsberg," he continued, "you'll have to do one thing or I'll have to do another, or we're going to lose the war. That girl in your office has completely disrupted the Royal Navy. Every officer we've got from commander down to sub-lieutenant has been standing in a trance outside your office door all morning looking at that girl, and though she doesn't even look up at 'em, we haven't been able to get a blasted thing done. The war's stopped on dead center around here, and I leave it to you what we do to get it underway again. Either you'll have to keep your office door closed so they can't see her, or the Admiral will have to station a Royal Marine sentry outside your door with orders to see everybody goes by there on the double! Which'll you have?"

I looked down the hall at the jam blocking it in front of my office. There were dozens of Wrens in the Royal Navy offices all up and down the corridor but I saw no moonstruck groups at the other doors peering in—apparently the Wrens weren't giving Private Stacy much competition.

"I'll keep the door closed, Shaw," I decided. "We won't call out the Marines unless I need help to keep it closed. You tell the Admiral the war can now proceed." I went down the hall a bit, shoved my way again through the gaping crowd, entered my office, and slammed the door in the faces of practically the whole Royal Navy banked six deep outside.

Private Stacy, still pounding expertly away on that inventory, didn't even look up. I thanked my stars it was not my obligation, once she was off duty, to keep either Americans or British, no longer allies, shooed away from her doorstep. Personnel problems, espe-

cially international ones, could be more racking even than wrecks, as I'd already learned in Oran. I looked at her. I decided I needn't worry. Private Virginia Stacy, T/5, was just as deeply interested in helping win the war as I was; maybe even more so, seeing that she had a longer-term stake in the outcome. I concentrated once more on the *Thomas Stone*.

Already I had Lieutenant Ankers and Captain Harding of the *King Salvor* working with Captain Bennehoff of the *Thomas Stone* on the problem of getting his ship off the beach. Considering the elaborate equipment needed for such a task, most of which we didn't have and couldn't get, the chances looked poor for success till someone somewhere furnished us the wherewithal to go about it properly. Meanwhile, I was willing to try with what we had, but success in that case would depend not so much on us as on what the floor of Algiers Bay turned out to be.

A three ring circus was in full swing around the *Thomas Stone*.

Somewhat offshore from her in deep water, Ankers and his divers were blasting holes in the solid rock floor which we had discovered comprised the bottom of Algiers Bay, so that into those holes we might drop anchors which would hold when we commenced pulling on the *Thomas Stone*.

On the stranded ship itself, Bennehoff's crew were working day and night lightening up and barging ashore everything they possibly could get out of her without tearing her hull apart—stores, water, fuel oil, boats, heavy guns, concrete ballast, ammunition—everything removable except her A.A. guns and the ammunition for them.

Roundabout the *Thomas Stone*, every small boat Bennehoff had was out with quartermasters and leadlines, sounding carefully each few feet the waters between his stranded ship high on the beach, and a line offshore with water deep enough to float his stranded ship.

Every part was important. With a multitude of anchors, steel hawsers, and heavy four-fold sheave blocks, rigged luff on luff to multiply the purchase, we should be able to exert a pull on the stern of the *Thomas Stone* equal to that pushing along the *Queen Mary* with all her engines going full power at 30 knots. But to take

such a terrific pull, the bottom of Algiers Bay as holding ground was worthless; that was why we needed the holes blasted in the solid rock beneath a thin cover of a few inches of sand and mud to give our anchors a solid grip.

Lightening up to the limit the scarcely waterborne *Thomas Stone* was obvious. But even with everything out of her, so little was the sea buoying her up, she would still be resting with a weight of 2000 tons on the bottom—a bottom of solid rock with the sand cover nowhere over six inches thick. Whether she would move or not, even under the 1000-ton pull we could exert on her, depended on the friction between her bottom and the rock and sand forming the bottom of the bay. If that friction was less than 50 per cent, she'd move; otherwise not. But we'd never know till we'd tried; it couldn't be computed in advance.

Finally and most important of all, were the soundings to seaward. Unless they showed a reasonably flat surface over the rock bottom in some direction all the way out to deep water, it was useless to move her. If, with all that weight on the bottom, we straddled her over even one moderate ridge of rock, we'd break her back and then she would be only scrap iron.

It was a very complicated situation, to be handled with great tenderness if the valuable *Thomas Stone* were not to be wrecked completely instead of saved in the salvage attempt. On this, all hands were working like beavers above and below the sea—blasting, laying out hawsers, lightering weights, sounding, and not least important, pushing slide rules to compute where all of it might get us.

The third day after my return to Algiers, a little before noon I was with Jerry Wright, discussing the possibilities of a tow home for the *Thomas Stone* if we dragged her clear. His telephone rang. He answered it, listened a moment, growing more red in the face each instant, hung up the phone. He turned again to me.

“Sorry, but I've got to cut this short and get down to the *Thomas Stone* four bells. Want to come along?”

“Certainly!” I answered. After all, the *Thomas Stone* was my own major problem. We started out. “But what else is wrong now on the *Thomas Stone*?”

"Too much! Bennehoff's in trouble up to his neck this time! The top brass hat in the Fleet Air Arm of the R.A.F. was on that phone. The *Thomas Stone* in broad daylight has just shot down a British Swordfish torpedo plane and its crew over Algiers Bay! They're madder'n hornets in the Fleet Air Arm and they want Benny hanged, drawn, and quartered for it right now!"

I looked at Jerry speechless. Poor Benny! This on top of all else! It'd ruin him.

We started down the hill, roared eastward along the shore front. But I couldn't believe it. There must be a mistake; Benny was too good a captain and had his crew under too good control for them to get trigger-happy and shoot down a friendly plane. It must have been some other ship which had done it.

We reached the beach, grabbed an LCVP there, in another minute or two were climbing the high side ladder to the *Thomas Stone*'s quarter-deck. Benny met us at the gangway. One look at Benny's face indicated that however wrathful the British might be, their rage was amiability itself compared to the fury contorting his features. He judged correctly the reason for Jerry's unscheduled call and beat him to the punch.

"Yes, I shot down that Swordfish! And you can go straight back to the British Air Marshal or Admiral or whoever sent you and tell 'im that the next one that tries to come over the *Thomas Stone* like that, 'll get shot down too!"

Jerry Wright had not been selected as liaison officer for nothing; he was a good diplomat as well as a good sailor. Expertly he calmed down his infuriated classmate, learned what had happened.

Not thirty minutes earlier, somewhat before noon, Benny's radar lookouts had reported an unidentified plane approaching from the eastward, the enemy direction. Benny had instantly sounded the General Alarm; all hands had gone to action stations. Benny himself, armed with binoculars, had taken his command post. Shortly, though his glasses he could make out the plane, apparently a sizable bomber, still hardly more than a dot in the sky coming from easterly, right in line with the sun, the normal enemy approach. Neither he nor his exec nor his gunnery officer was able to make it out clearly, masked as that plane was by the sun right be-

hind it. It answered no recognition signals, it made none of its own. Friendly planes were strictly forbidden to fly over or near our ships; this one was certainly headed for him. He kept on trying to identify it up to the last second when it reached the point where if he delayed further, it could dive on him to release torpedoes or bombs. Still no identification. He wasn't taking chances with "friendly" enemy planes—too many other skippers had to their sorrow. He gave the order,

"Commence firing!"

His gunners were good—they'd had lots of practice. In no time at all, that plane came tumbling down out of the sky to crash into Algiers Bay about half a mile to the eastward of him. Not till the spinning plane was low over the water and out of the sun were they able to make it out as a British Swordfish. He had sent a boat to the scene promptly; they had fished its crew out of the wreckage—three British flyers, all still alive. They were below in his sick-bay right then; his naval surgeons were working over them. One was badly wounded but would recover; the other two were suffering from shock and submersion only—they'd be all right soon. The smashed Swordfish itself had sunk quickly; it was a total loss. And if the British wanted to lose any more Swordfish, let 'em repeat what that plane had done. Benny would shoot the next one down too.

We left. The shoe was on the other foot; that Swordfish had violated every rule; Benny was certainly justified; it was the British whose faces should be red. And as a matter of fact, they were. It appeared by the time they got through investigating their end, even the poor Swordfish was wholly innocent—the blunder had occurred ashore. The Swordfish had been sent in to practice exactly what it was doing—a simulated aerial torpedo attack on the shipping in the harbor. Only, to avoid trouble, the harbor guns and all the shipping in the harbor had been notified—all, that is, except the *Thomas Stone*. Being stranded far outside the harbor, the ground control forces had forgotten all about her as a ship. Benny had received no notification. The Swordfish paid.

The sequel had its comical aspects. A few days later, I bumped into Benny ashore. He invited me to accompany him. I couldn't; I

was busy on the waterfront; what was up? Benny explained. He was on his way to Allied Headquarters. The Admiral of the Fleet himself was to pin a British decoration on him as recognition of his skill, determination, and courage for bringing in the shattered *Thomas Stone* and all her troops. I congratulated him; he'd earned it.

Benny grinned at me as we parted; I grinned back. Both of us knew that ordinarily a decoration like that took months for all the red tape to be unwound between the deed and the decoration. Without question in his case, the mortified British, trying to make amends for the Swordfish, had made hash of their hallowed routine in their haste to make the award then instead of months or years later. I was sorry I couldn't go to see it. It would be a little something to compensate Captain Bennehoff for all the anguish he'd been through.

C H A P T E R

36

I HAD A DISCUSSION WITH THE ADMIRAL of the Fleet concerning what had been done afloat and ashore and our problems in handling the remaining wrecks and harbors up and down the coast. The long-awaited sister to the *King Salvador*, the *Salvestor*, with Commander Hewett, R.N.R., as her salvage officer, had just arrived in Algiers.

Temporarily, I had detailed the *Salvestor* to working on S.S. *Strasbourg*, a freighter which had come into Algiers with a large hole in her bow as a result of an aerial torpedo dropped by an unidentified plane which her naïve crew had allowed to circle them in the most friendly manner several times, till unexpectedly it had let go a torpedo. After patching up the *Strasbourg*, the *Salvestor* would go to Bougie, where we had nothing in the way of salvage forces.

The difficulties encountered around Oran in the past were gone over. Admiral Cunningham felt a solution was in order. Both because the importance of the command justified it, and in recognition of what had been accomplished, he would recommend me for promotion to Rear Admiral. Naturally I was gratified that he felt it warranted, and especially at this mark of his appreciation, but I was none too optimistic the recommendation would get anywhere, seeing I was in the American Navy and he was British. But he had no doubts over it; the recommendation would go forward as from General Eisenhower, Allied C-in-C, and in the very strongest terms Eisenhower could put it.

I was uncertain of that and told Cunningham so. After all, Eisenhower probably didn't know of my existence, having long since

forgotten our brief meeting. But Cunningham felt otherwise. Eisenhower, he told me, had personally followed our salvage work, knew as much about it as he himself, and had taken the keenest interest in it; there was no question as to his making the recommendation. It would go in very shortly; the higher rank would avoid repetition of some past difficulties. I thanked Cunningham and left, treading on air. With more rank than the captains I should normally have to deal with, my salvage path should be smoother in the future.

January 19 I started over the road on a 500-mile trip eastward toward Tunisia for my first personal inspection of the minor harbors close up to the stalemated fighting line. My colored sergeant (who had brought my jeep over the road from Oran) was driving as usual. Not as usual, we went armed, both of us. East of Algiers, it was compulsory. One was always likely, especially in a small car traveling alone and without the protection of a convoy, to fall in with Nazi paratroopers dropped behind our lines to lurk near the roads for pot shots at miscellaneous targets. The sergeant had a carbine snuggled close up against the steering wheel; I had a Colt .32 which Ankers had loaned me because it was handier to get about with than the regulation Colt .45.

We followed the coast road eastward. It was gorgeous scenery along the various Grande Corniches cut into cliff faces looking out over the Mediterranean—scenery to make the French Riviera on the other side of the Mediterranean, which I had also driven over, look decidedly second-rate.

But I had no time to dawdle over scenery. We raced eastward with our jeep going all out, except on the innumerable occasions when we fell astern of and had to crawl past interminable convoys of army trucks, tanks, and half-tracks all moving eastward toward the fighting line. Mile after mile we went at snail's pace by them—it seemed that everything America had on wheels or on tractor treads was moving up to reinforce the front. No wonder back home gasoline was strictly rationed—everything landed at Oran and Algiers was moving overland pushed by gasoline up to where it was soon to go into action against von Arnim and Rommel. And the long convoys were stretched out even longer because they were all moving under battle conditions—fifty-yard intervals between trucks,

every fourth truck or tank with an A.A. gun mounted on top, manned and ready to meet Nazi fighting planes attempting to strafe the convoys.

We got to Bougie. I had as yet nobody at all in Bougie for salvage. Bougie was terrible to look upon. The outer bay was a forest of masts and stacks sticking up through the surface. Below in deep water, completely submerged, lay the hulls of over half a dozen British troopships, all sizable ones, sunk by Nazi bombs shortly after they had landed the troops to seize Bougie. That was in our desperate rush to the east right after D-day to take all those ports and Bizerte before the Nazis got there.

The inner harbor of Bougie was as bad—side by side with moderate intervals of water between lay four other ships, all wrecks. Alongside the quay was the British freighter *Glenfinlas*, bow submerged, with her starboard side forward near her bilge blasted out by a Nazi bomb.

Next outside her, flat on the bottom but with all her upper hull and superstructure exposed, lay a fair-sized French passenger ship, sunk by a bomb which also had gutted her above water by fire. Beyond her lay the prize exhibits of Bougie—two large French Mediterranean passenger liners, like miniature *Normandies*, both capsized and lying facing each other, one on her starboard side, one on her port side, with their horizontal stacks and masts lovingly interlaced just above the surface.

What had happened to these last two ships I completely refused to believe till I had heard it verified from unimpeachable naval sources. The Nazis hadn't sunk them; their own owners had, and not for sabotage either. When the first Nazi air raid after the Allied occupation of Bougie occurred, and the two ships closest inshore had been hit and sunk by bombs with one of them also set afire, the owners of the other two, though both were reasonably distant from the burning vessel, attempted in a panic to scuttle their two ships to keep them from catching fire!

What followed might have been expected. Both ships, being French, naturally capsized long before enough water from opened sea valves had entered to sink them, to lie on their sides, half in the shallow water, half out, practically unsalvageable except at

terrific cost. Incidentally, on neither ship had the half exposed above water, caught fire. It was hard for me to believe that even an excitable Frenchman would think of sinking his own ship and surely losing her to avoid the possibility of having her damaged by fire, but there they were—it had actually happened!

Only the *Glenfinlas* seemed worth tackling, both to recover the ship and to clear the berth at the quay, but I had no salvage equipment or men in Bougie. I learned, however, that a company of Royal Engineers stationed in Bougie and commanded by a Scotch lieutenant, were figuring on tackling the job. To me, any help was welcome; I didn't mind who salvaged ships so long as they were salvaged. I looked over the lieutenant's plans. I had to tell him that in turning out salvage plans, he was about as good as I might be in designing his specialty, military bridges. Short of all the crane facilities of New York harbor, his plan was unrealizable. It would take a huge floating derrick, unobtainable on that coast, to handle the tremendous one piece patch he was figuring on building ashore with his engineers and then installing over the hole in the *Glenfinlas'* starboard side.

But there was a much easier way. I pointed it out to him. It was unnecessary to bother with the submerged hole. All that was required to float the *Glenfinlas* was to seal off the exposed upper cargo hatch over her punctured hold by welding steel plates over it. No divers were required. The work could be done wholly above water by his engineers. After that, we could get some air compressors, blow the water out the *Glenfinlas'* bow through the bomb hole below, float her up on a huge bubble of air, and she could then steam, hole and all, under her own power on her undamaged machinery to Algiers to be docked and have the hole patched up. It was very simple. I would send a salvage officer down later to supervise the actual lifting.

The Scotch lieutenant, a very eager young engineer, cast aside his designs for a patch and started out instead to get the materials for sealing off the cargo hatch.

I spent the night in Bougie with the British captain commanding there. It was an unusual night—no bombs. Next morning I started eastward again for Philippeville.

Philippeville I found not as bad as Bougie. There were fewer wrecks there. The main problem was the Dutch *Aurora*, bow sunk by a bomb, stern afloat, right in the middle of the harbor, obstructing the fairway.

I had a British assistant, Lieutenant Strange, there. He had sized up the *Aurora* correctly, and with his solitary diver and hardly anything else, was going about floating her.

That he was making slow progress was not his fault. When I could get him some men and gear to work with, the *Aurora* would come bouncing surfaceward in a hurry.

That night was passed in Philippeville. Life there and in Bougie was evidently tough; bombs came down almost nightly. There wasn't a house left in either place with a sound roof; the bomb blasts had shattered the roof tiles everywhere when they hadn't shattered the houses also. There was the usual nightly raid; I was tired and slept through it.

In the morning we moved on towards Bône, making even slower progress than before because of almost continuous truck convoys now five to ten miles long we had to pass on the narrow roads. In Bône, only a few miles short of the fighting line, I saw again Lieutenant Commander White, R.N.V.R., whom I had sent there from Oran, and was able to cheer him up with the news that the *King Salvador* and all her salvage gear should be along in a week or two to rejoin him—just as soon as she finished with the *Thomas Stone*.

White needed cheering up that morning. After a struggle of some weeks, he had managed the day before to refloat *H.M.S. Alarm*, a moderate-sized warship, which some time before had been sunk inside the harbor by a near miss bomb which had left her leaking like a sieve. And then last night, in the usual air raid, another bomb had gone right through her engine room to explode underneath and sink her again! Now poor White had the whole job to do over again. But he was taking it well—far more phlegmatically than I could have.

I went over his situation and most of his wrecks with him. Bône, though not so large, was a sad looking sight, both in its harbor and in the town. It was getting a terrific pasting from the Nazis near by—to them a trip to Bône was just a five-cent trolley ride—twenty

minutes transit time. One bomber could make half a dozen round trips a night to unload on Bône. There were many wrecks we didn't even board—the sweet by-and-by would be soon enough to look them over. It was obvious White had a man-sized job in Bône even if not another bomb ever fell to add other wrecks to his collection.

It took me all afternoon to inspect even what wrecks I boarded in Bône harbor. By dusk I was finished. White informed me we could expect the first wave of bombers in about an hour or so. Just to sleep in a bed in Bône didn't seem to me to warrant subjecting myself to another bombing when it wasn't imperative. I decided that instead of leaving Bône in the morning, I'd get out right then, even though it meant sleeping in an open field that night. There was no chance in a blacked-out car running counter to blacked-out convoys, of getting westward to the next town. So against a background of wrecked ships and wrecked houses, I said goodby to White and shoved off in the growing darkness in my jeep.

By midmorning, January 23, we were back in Algiers. My sergeant turned in his carbine; I gave Ankers back his Colt automatic. We had had no occasion to use them.

C H A P T E R

37

MY RETURN TO ALGIERS WAS JUST in time to go to work again without a lost minute. Everything had just been completed for heaving on the *Thomas Stone*; we might try moving her whenever it suited me.

A real storm above everything would have been a godsend to us in piling up the water along the shore to ease the weight to be dragged. But there was no immediate hope of a storm of any kind. There was even less hope of one such as came only once in ten years and had laid her up on the beach. So I concluded we might as well try immediately. The soundings showed ridges in the rock bottom all about the *Thomas Stone* except in one direction. Along that one line, though it wasn't the most direct route astern of her to deep water, the rock bottom was reasonably flat. But it wasn't a straight line; we should have to drag her seaward part way, then swing her round about 30° and finish the pull to deep water at a considerable angle to the shore line.

All hands took stations. In addition to the hawsers laid out astern, the *King Salvor* took another line to add the power of her propeller to the drag, and two British destroyers were set to run back and forth just to seaward of all the lines and make as heavy waves as they could to help lift her.

We started. Every winch on the *Thomas Stone* began heaving in on the wire lines from the multiple purchases, the *King Salvor* heaved furiously on her hawser, the destroyers steamed back and forth making waves. Very slowly, almost at a glacial pace, about a hundred yards in a hundred years, the *Thomas Stone* crept seaward. But it was swiftly evident that the friction on the bottom was so

great that all the power we could exert was barely able to move her. We kept on heaving all the rest of the day, with frequent enforced pauses to rerig our purchases every time the sheaves came two-blocks and would haul no farther. But when the day finally ended and a check showed we had moved the ship seaward hardly a ship length, I decided it safest to discontinue.

I wasn't interested in dragging the *Thomas Stone* off the beach just as a stunt; I wanted a repairable ship when we got her afloat. And to keep on with the dragging while her bottom was riding as hard as it evidently was over solid rock, and with that difficult turn to be made still ahead of us, could only result in the ship's having no bottom at all to keep her afloat when she finally got to deep water. And if we took the shorter and direct route to deep water, we'd ride her over a ridge of rock which would break her back. It was no go. We should have to wait till more elaborate equipment, preferably submersible pontoons which could take most of the load off the bottom, was available to us.

It hurt to break the news to Benny. It would at best be months yet till pontoons could be obtained from the United States; unless we could persuade the authorities there to remember that the *Thomas Stone* was an American warship and to forget that she was stranded in an area of British responsibility, it would be never. I told Benny we must suspend operations or we'd ruin his ship. He'd have to wait again; how long, I couldn't say. I'd do my best to get lifting pontoons as quickly as possible so we could make another try with success assured that way. He took it philosophically; at least he was no longer neglected; some day we'd get his ship afloat again. Gloomily all hands began to unrig the hauling tackle.

We were still at it next morning when just before noon I got a message that the Admiral of the Fleet wanted to see me. Dressed as usual in my nondescript collection of army woolen olive drab, I left the *Thomas Stone* and went up the hill to the St. George.

I was shown in to Cunningham's office. For once he was alone; usually his Chief of Staff was there. He smiled genially at me, asked me to be seated.

"Now, Ellsberg," he began, "at last you'll have to wear your blue uniform again."

I sat up with a jolt. Now I was finally going to catch it. Several of his staff captains had already warned me that no one was ever allowed to see the admiral save in his best blues, worn out though they might be. They had always marveled he hadn't thrown me out before, for never except on the one occasion I had first reported to him had he seen me in navy blue, the solitary such uniform I had in Africa. Ever since that day, with that uniform always in Oran, I had seen him only in my army working clothes, all I ever wore. And he'd never said a word about it. However, with my headquarters now in Algiers, I guessed he'd concluded I could begin to toe the line with all the Royal Navy. But he took a different tack.

"Yes," he continued, "you really ought to wear it this time. General Eisenhower has asked me to tell you you're invited to tea at his villa this afternoon, and to dinner with him later. And I think you'll meet an old friend of yours there. So you'd better wear your blue uniform. That's all."

I left to get back to my quarters and drag out my one and only set of blues. They looked rather wrinkled from overlong stowage in bulging canvas aviation bags. But it was too late to get them pressed; I flattened them out as best I could, shoved them under the mattress, and sat on them in hopes that might help a bit. After all, Cunningham was right; if the C-in-C was honoring me with an invitation to dinner, I ought not to discredit the Navy any more than I could help. I passed up lunch to sit on that uniform. When I finally dragged it out from under the mattress, it did look a trifle smoother.

But all the while I sat, I was puzzling over Cunningham's cryptic statement. Who might the old friend be for whose benefit, as well as for General Eisenhower's, I ought to dress up? I couldn't even hazard a guess. So I concentrated on my clothes.

Once completely attired, I went back to the St. George to have Private Stacy first pass judgment on me. She looked me over critically, finally concluded that as the lighting even in the general's villa would probably be dim anyway, I might pass. Besides, she

pointed out, I'd lost so much weight the uniform was too big for me now, and anyone would naturally (and charitably) conclude that the wrinkles I hadn't eliminated resulted from that cause. I could safely chance it. So, stamped with Private Stacy's much-qualified approval, I set out, though I judged she wouldn't herself have been found dead with her uniform in no better state of press than mine.

I had only a vague notion as to where Eisenhower's villa was, other than that it was somewhere in a garden adjoining the St. George. So I asked one of his military aides for sailing directions. I should have had a pilot. There were barbed wire entanglements all over the place, with the path leading through harder to follow than the channel threading the torpedo-defense nets guarding Mers-el-Kebir against U-boats.

Then in addition, there were vicious-looking armed sentries popping out at unexpected moments from the shrubbery, demanding to see my pass. It was evident that between the barbed wire and the sentries, no Nazi paratroopers dropped thereabouts were going to have an easy time kidnaping or killing the C-in-C, nor was any deluded French student going to be allowed, unquestioned, to take a seat at the General's doorstep and shoot him, à la Darlan, when he came home. I didn't blame Eisenhower, but it caused me trouble.

Finally, a little late, I made it. Lieutenant Commander Butcher, naval aide, greeted me to say the General would be down before long, but meanwhile there was someone else who'd like to see me. Still wondering who that might be, I was let into a long living room.

I received a first class surprise. There, hand outstretched in greeting, was Ernie King, Commander-in-Chief of the United States Fleet, Chief of Naval Operations, and the highest ranking admiral in our Navy! I could hardly believe my eyes. What could he be doing in an area of British responsibility, where besides we had no active warships of our own?

But I was certainly happy to see him again. We'd first met long years before on a salvage job, when he, a captain, had been Officer-in-Charge of the Salvage Squadron detailed to raise the sunken submarine *S-51*, and I, a lieutenant commander, had been his assistant as Salvage Officer on her. Since then our paths had crossed

many times, the last occasion in Washington a few days after Pearl Harbor when he'd just been dragged in from sea to take command of the whole Navy and this time to salvage a nation.

I'd said goodby to him then just before I shoved off myself for Massawa, feeling that if any man could save America from disaster, Ernie King could. I had worked under him in time of stress before; to me, he was the best all-around officer the Navy had. And there wasn't a man on earth I was gladder to see at that moment than Ernie King.

We sat down, Butcher left. My astonishment at seeing Admiral King in Africa was so apparent, he explained. He'd just come from the Casablanca Conference between Roosevelt and Churchill. My eyebrows lifted again; I hadn't heard the slightest whisper around Algiers of any such conference. And in Casablanca, he went on to tell me, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound, First Sea Lord of the British Admiralty (and Ernie King's opposite number in the Royal Navy) had taken occasion to thank him for the salvage results I'd produced in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

"Well, Ellsberg," continued Admiral King, "I told him it was only what I'd expected of you; you were the best salvage officer in the world. And he heartily agreed with me."

Though at the moment he didn't know it, Ernie King was playing right down my alley; soon enough he'd find it out—what I wanted of him was not compliments but a little help and some badly needed pontoons for saving the navy's best attack transport, the *U.S.S. Thomas Stone*.

We talked on about other things; how different the situation was then from the day when last we'd parted when it seemed all but hopeless between the Japanese tide flooding westward toward India and Rommel starting his victorious rush eastward across Africa towards Suez. Now, only the day before Tripoli had surrendered, Rommel was fleeing into Tunisia. At the Coral Sea and Midway we had smashed the Japanese advance and were starting on the road back ourselves with the result no longer doubtful—only how much longer would it take.

King looked me over critically. Evidently my appearance didn't

suit him. He suggested I take things a bit easier now. That was my cue.

"Admiral," I replied, "I could, if I had some help in keeping up with the wrecks. You send me six young officers with engineering training to lend a hand; I don't care if they've had no salvage experience. I'll make salvage officers out of them. And I desperately need a dozen salvage pontoons right now for the *Thomas Stone*!" and I explained why.

King was, of course, keenly interested. Right there I turned to, making pencil sketches of exactly the kind of pontoons I wanted, very simple ones, but big. I outlined also my requirements for officer assistants. He made a note of that, slipped my pontoon sketches into his pocket. Then he explained to me that it was a tough situation—the Mediterranean was wholly an area of British responsibility. But for what little I so badly wanted, I needn't worry. He would see the six officers were shortly sent to help me; he personally would see that from some navy allotment somewhere was squeezed out the few hundred tons of steel necessary to build the salvage pontoons to save the *Thomas Stone* now and other wrecks later. The officers would be along in a few weeks; the pontoons, just as swiftly as they could be built and shipped—two months perhaps.

At that moment, General Eisenhower came down, our tête-à-tête on salvage ceased abruptly. Eisenhower welcomed me genially, congratulated me on getting Oran open again, and we all sat down to tea. King steered the conversation in a different direction—what did Eisenhower think of Darlan?

He couldn't apparently have touched a subject to open Eisenhower up more vehemently. Eisenhower, still smarting under heavy attack from American opinion, told him. Knowing what he now knew, if he had it all to do over again, he'd do exactly the same. It had been the right and the only move open to him to get along with the war against the Nazis. As for Darlan himself, whether he had been a patriot or merely a turncoat anxious to be on the winning side, Eisenhower would not pretend to pass judgment. All he knew for a fact was that from the moment he and Darlan had reached an agreement, Darlan had always played square with him

to the day of his death, wholeheartedly and effectively co-operating in a difficult situation to defeat our enemies and the enemies of France. No man could have done more. What were his motives? Only God knew; Eisenhower would not presume to judge; Darlan was dead now—his conduct with us entitled him to the benefit of all doubts.

Once again there was an interruption. In through the front door came General Alexander, Commander-in-Chief of the British Eighth Army, still in dusty battle dress, hot off the desert from the taking of Tripoli not twenty-four hours before! Apparently generals could come to tea in working clothes, even if it were advisable for salvage officers to try it. Eisenhower introduced him to King and to me, and poured some tea for him. The conversation shifted to Rommel and the conditions of desert warfare, where sand, not mud, was the problem.

But that wasn't all. Very shortly down the stairs from the second floor came to join us the Army Chief of Staff, General Marshall! My eyes bugged out. I had certainly hit into something. Eisenhower, Alexander, Marshall, King—the Allied Commander-in-Chief for Torch, the British Commander-in-Chief for all the rest of Africa, the Army Chief of Staff, the Chief of Naval Operations—what a collection! If a rain of Nazi paratroopers had descended from the skies just then to seize Eisenhower, they would have fallen dead at the sight of their actual bag. I understood better now why I had run into so many tough-looking sentries amongst all the barbed wire entanglements outside.

I was introduced to General Marshall, then Eisenhower proceeded to pour more tea. The conversation began again, all shop talk—how quickest to win the war with the least loss of men. I listened silently.

But as the afternoon waned and the little knot around the tea table broke up, in all probability to give Eisenhower and Alexander a chance for a private discussion as to how best they might now squeeze Rommel in Tunisia between the two of them, I became a little uneasy. After all, though I'd been invited for dinner also, this was more than I had bargained for.

I drew Admiral King aside and suggested that I might be a trifle

out of place at dinner with all the gold lace and silver stars gleaming around there; I could easily excuse myself on urgent salvage business and leave them freer for top echelon discussion. But King said no; I must stay. Nobody would be embarrassed. So I stayed for dinner.

C H A P T E R

38

WE HAD A BUSY SESSION IN MY office next day. I had brought Lieutenant Ankers ashore once the *Thomas Stone* was unrigged, to start working with the Royal Navy staff on making up our salvage program for the assault on Bizerte when spring came. There was to be no repetition of the unpreparedness at the taking of Oran. We should have an overland salvage party and their gear all loaded in trucks to enter Bizerte on the heels of the army, ready to cope with sabotaged ships. The *King Salvor* and the *Salvestor* (with other salvage ships if by then we had any more) were to be lined up to enter instantly from the sea side when the city fell. A large amount of preparatory work was necessary for the set-up. Ankers turned to on it.

Meanwhile the *King Salvor* was hurriedly preparing to sail at long last for Bône to rejoin her regular salvage officer. I spent some time in instructing Captain Harding on the situation there.

In the midst of these discussions, in walked Captain Bennehoff to say goodby to me. He had just been detached from the *Thomas Stone* and ordered to Arzeu to take command on the beaches there and train landing craft crews in amphibious warfare—that had been his speciality. Where would the men he trained work? My guess was the next beachhead assault would be on Sicily, once Tunisia was taken. But Benny was non-committal—my guess was too good to make discussion safe. Whether Benny was glad or sorry, was hard to make out. He was certainly sorry to leave his ship still on the beach; unquestionably he was glad to have an active assignment again, even if only with flotillas of small craft. I wished him luck.

Then a dispatch came in from Captain Reed in Oran. Once the Grand Dock was up, before leaving Oran I had started Reed's men on the lifting of the Moyen Dock, capsized with the capsized French submarine *Danaë* on top of it. Reed wired that he had run into a peculiar salvage situation. Could I come back to Oran? The instructions I'd left him didn't fit conditions he'd found on his new wrecks.

Leaving Ankers and Reitzel to run the Algiers office, I returned next morning to Oran. Shortly I was out in a small boat over the sunken port side of the capsized Moyen Dock. Somewhat to my left was the starboard side wall of the dock, mostly out of water. Beneath me, completely invisible, was the sunken *Danaë*. Bill Reed explained to me his problem; Buck Scougale and Al Watson filled in the details.

After a brief rest from their labors on the Grand Dock, they had turned to on the Moyen Dock. It was a shallow water job, hardly thirty feet down and comparatively simple. It lay close to the quays, to the right of the Môle Millerand. My instructions had been to waste no time in sealing up the submarine *Danaë* or in attempting to raise her first. They were to disregard her, seal up the sunken side of the Moyen Dock, and blow that to the surface with compressed air, bringing the sunken submarine up with it.

That had been the idea and they had tried, but it wouldn't do—they couldn't. It appeared that the *Danaë* in rolling off the keel blocks to port inside the dry dock, had capsized about three-quarters round and her conning tower had punched a hole in the steel floor of the dry dock, making it non-watertight. When they blew compressed air into the dry dock, all the air amidships promptly blew out that hole and the dock wouldn't float up. They had tried to get to the hole to patch it, but in that they'd been baffled also. The capsized submarine was lying so close on top the hole, an eel couldn't get to it. Both Buck and Al had tried to worm their way under the sub to that hole but they just couldn't squeeze in; it was wholly inaccessible.

There was no way out except to lift the submarine off the dock first to expose the hole so it could be patched. Reed had done all the preparatory work toward that already, but so long as I was

available, he felt I should know before he went contrary to my orders. Did I mind if he lifted the submarine first? It was that or nothing.

Of course I didn't mind. They could begin right away; I'd watch. Reed started up his air compressors and began to blow air into the almost upside down submarine. It wasn't a very big one; around 600 tons. But after a little on the spot figuring, I doubted it would float up. Reed could get only about 400 tons buoyancy into it before the air started to escape from the open conning tower hatch which he couldn't get to to batten down.

That was what happened. In less than an hour, air started to bubble up freely but the sub hadn't floated. Still, the remaining weight of the *Danaë* couldn't be great; a big floating crane should be able to lift either end. We sent tugs for the only crane Oran had, the one we had used on the *Spahi*. Soon they were back with it. By that time, the divers had put a heavy wire sling around the submarine's tail.

The crane hooked on to that and with no great effort heaved the *Danaë*'s stern to the surface.

But at that point, all hands started to scratch their heads. We had the *Danaë* by the tail, all right, but what next? There was only one crane in Oran. If we let go the stern to lift the bow with the only crane there was, the stern would promptly sink back again on top the Moyen Dock. We were stymied.

The French captain of the crane got tired of hanging on to the *Danaë*'s tail and asked me what I wished of him next. In Spanish we fought the situation out. It appeared there was nothing to be done except for him to slack away and let the stern sink again while I thought it over.

Reed and I finally concluded there was only one way out. There was no other crane. We must find some sort of scow or barge in Oran harbor which could float a load of about 100 tons. With that available, we could lift the stern to the surface again with the crane, then carefully transfer the load to slings on the scow, let go with the crane, shift the crane over the bow, lift the bow, tow the whole floating assembly of crane, submarine, and scow off the Moyen Dock, and then sink the *Danaë* in the mud somewhere near

by where she wouldn't annoy us any further while we proceeded to raise the Moyen Dock.

That looked all right. In my best Spanish, I told the crane skipper to stand by till morning; by then we'd have a scow and would proceed. Reed landed me on the Môle Millerand and shoved off immediately in the boat to scout Oran harbor and Mers-el-Kebir for a suitable scow. I went back to the Grand Hotel.

I had a few other matters to clean up in Oran, so it was not till nearly 9 A.M. next morning that I got back to the Môle Millerand. When I got there, all hands were out on the water over the Moyen Dock, so with no boat I couldn't join them. But I wasn't immediately concerned over that. I stared dumbfounded out over the harbor—there before my eyes were indubitably *two* 100-ton floating derricks maneuvering into position over the sunken *Danaë*, one at either end!

Over her sunken bow, just hooking on, was the big French crane we'd had the day before. Over the submerged stern, an exact duplicate of that crane was being jockeyed about to take hold there. How could that be? I knew for a fact there was only one such crane in Oran. You couldn't any more conceal another such towering mass of steel anywhere in the harbor than you could conceal the Washington Monument! But there *was* another one! However it had got there, now we were fixed to do the job right. I started to shout to Reed, busy on the slings to the submarine, to send a boat in for me.

While I was waiting for the boat, I became conscious of an army major at my elbow on the quay, scanning that mysterious crane as closely as I. Apparently he knew me, though I had no recollection of ever having seen him before. He spoke first, asking quite innocuously,

"You're Captain Ellsberg, aren't you?"

I admitted it.

"Fine floating derrick you're handling out there. Where'd you get it?"

I had to confess I didn't know. I'd never seen it before till a couple of minutes ago; in fact, I could still hardly believe it wasn't just a mirage I was looking at.

"Well, I can enlighten you then, Captain," he continued drily. "That crane belongs to the army. We had it towed in here this morning from about a hundred miles westward down the coast where we'd commandeered it to help unload General Sherman tanks from half a dozen newly arrived Liberties we've got alongside the quays here. How you got your hands on it, I don't know. We're supposed to start heaving out those tanks by noon with that crane. Now you've got it. I'm phoning General Larkin, Area Commander, about this right now!"

"I'm certainly sorry to hear that, Major," I apologized. "I didn't know anything about it, and I still don't know how it got here instead of alongside your ships. But it's just what we need for our salvage job. In an hour we'll be through with it; you'll have it back before noon. Mind asking General Larkin if we can keep that crane for an hour yet?"

He said he didn't mind passing along my message. He left to find a telephone; I shoved off in our boat which had just come in for me.

In a few minutes, I was in another boat over the sunken *Danaë* with Reed, Buck Scougale, and most of the rest of the little salvage crew.

"Bill," I asked, "how'd you get that crane?"

Reed was so convulsed with laughter he could hardly get out an intelligible sentence. Finally I made out part of it. He'd been unable, in spite of a careful search, to find any scow around Oran that we could safely hang the stern of the *Danaë* from while we lifted her stem. He'd come back to the job that morning completely sunk, wondering how we'd ever get the *Danaë* up so he could raise the Moyen Dock. While he was pondering that, what should he sight being towed into the harbor from seaward but the answer to a maiden's prayer, another 100-ton French crane, exactly what we needed to save the situation! And just in the nick of time, too!

Bill started laughing again so hard he became completely useless. Finally he managed to gasp out,

"Ask Buck! He'll tell you the rest!"

I turned to Buck. Never had I known Buck Scougale except as strictly business; no foolishness about him. There wasn't any now.

No matter what it might be about that crane that was doubling Bill Reed up in stitches, Buck was still as sober as a judge.

"All right, Buck. Out with it! How'd you get that crane?"

"Well, Cap, it was this way," he answered very seriously. "We was all out here stewing over what we'd do with that frog pigboat down there, seeing as Bill couldn't find a scow, when that new crane showed up coming through the harbor entrance with a couple o' French tugs towing it, just like Bill says. At first we all thought we'd had too much French red-eye, but she was real enough. So after Bill came to again enough to talk, he says to me,

"Buck, you can *parley voo* with these frogs better'n I can. You take the other boat, run out on the water to that crane four bells, and no matter where she's headed nor what it takes, you see she steers right in here. I leave it to you."

"So," continued Buck, "I hops into the other boat and in no time at all I'm alongside that crane. There's them frogs, tugboats and everything, all of 'em strangers to Oran, wondering what quay they're supposed to lay alongside of with the crane. I asks the chief frog, the skipper o' the crane, where he's bound with it. He says it's for *le général* somebody or other, he doesn't know his name. Where should he take it?"

"So I says I'll show 'im. I'm from General Delivery, I says, an' the general wants this crane right away for a hurry-up job alongside that other crane he can see ahead. Well, to that frog, one general's as good as another, so he heads in here with the crane. An' there she is, Cap; just what we need, on orders from General Delivery!"

Buck, still with a straight face, stopped explaining. Bill Reed doubled up again, guffawing over Buck's stratagem. I had to admit myself it was ingenious. But there were other aspects.

"See here, boys, this is serious!" I exclaimed. "That's General Larkin's crane you've swiped. I'm going to get hanged for it. One of his majors is phoning him right now that we've shanghaied it. For Christ's sake, Bill, quit laughing and get going with that crane on the *Danaë*'s tail! We've got to finish this job before they take it away from us, and there's damned little time!"

That brought Reed to. He sobered up instantly, went to work

with all his men helping the new crane to hook on to the heavy sling round the *Danaë*'s stern. But a massive floating crane is no rowboat to be juggled swiftly into lifting position; it took some minutes to get the ponderous lifting hook engaged. After that, it would take roughly thirty minutes more for that crane, just in from sea, to adjust its water ballast tanks to stand a maximum lift. From then on, the lift itself would go swiftly. In an hour everything would be all over. Nervous as a cat, I watched, hoping that that morning Brigadier General Larkin, Area Commander, whom I'd never met, might be somewhere out in the field with his troops where his major couldn't get him quickly.

I had no such luck. While the crane hook was being engaged, I heard a loud voice calling me from the quay. It was no use pretending I couldn't hear; we were so close inshore, hearing was easy. I looked shoreward. There was the major calling me.

"General Larkin wants to talk to you!" he shouted. "He's waiting on the phone!"

None too hopefully, I played for time.

"Tell him I'm busy out on the water over a wreck!" I bellowed back. "I'll be through in about an hour and I'll come ashore and call him then!"

"He knows damned well where you are!" was the answer. "He says you're to drop everything and get on that phone right now!"

It was no use. I couldn't afford openly to flout the orders of the army's Area Commander, especially as he was senior to me. I told Reed, for the love of God, to shake things up; I'd do my best with Larkin to get him the rest of the hour he needed. Then I clambered into a boat and was swiftly ashore. The major was waiting for me; he indicated a near by tool room on the quay where the phone was. I entered; the receiver was off the hook; I picked up the phone; Brigadier General Larkin, madder than hops, was on the other end, waiting.

Very icily, very formally, the general told me off. I had stolen his crane. I tried to explain. There was no need to explain; he knew all about it from his major (only, unfortunately, I knew the major didn't know *all* about it, though he did know too much); there was no call for explanations, for discussion. I was to discon-

tinue instantly whatever I was doing with that crane and turn it over immediately to his major to be towed elsewhere. The crane belonged to the army; it was to be delivered to the army at once!

I tried to get in a word edgewise, pleading for the use of the crane for only one hour; it would still get to its army assignment in time. The general wasn't discussing it; the stolen crane was to be turned over instantly. After his representatives had it in their possession ready to move it away, if I had anything further to say in extenuation of the theft, he'd listen; not before. The conversation ended.

The major was just outside. I told him to wait on the quay; when we had the crane completely cast loose and clear of our wreck, he could come aboard and take it where he pleased. I shoved off in the boat.

The crane was all hooked on, its ballast tanks already half filled aft in preparation for counter-balancing the heavy load to be taken over its bow. In about ten minutes more, it would be ready to lift.

I ordered Reed to belay everything; I'd lost; General Larkin wouldn't let us keep the crane even for what was left of the hour we needed. All I could hope for was that by letting go now, I could persuade him to loan us the crane for an hour some days later when the army finished with it, before it went back west where it belonged. Even that was doubtful, if I was any judge of Larkin's feelings.

My divers, listening, gazed at me incredulously, then let go an obscene chorus of objections. How could anyone, even a general, act like that? After all, wasn't it everybody's war? What the hell were we raising the Moyen Dock for, if not to help the Army? It wasn't helping our Navy any; we had no warships in the Mediterranean. But I wasn't discussing anything. I motioned Reed to accompany me aboard the new crane; we'd order it to cast loose.

We boarded the crane. I got hold of its skipper, a bearded Frenchman, very busy on shifting ballast. As best I could in Spanish, I explained the job was suspended; he was to cast loose. When he was clear, General Larkin's representative (I indicated to him the major on the quay) would board him and show him where he was to go next.

The Frenchman stared at me completely bewildered, then opened up with both arms and a profane mixture of Spanish and French. Were the Americans in Oran crazy? Here he had hardly poked his nose into the harbor when he had been rushed across it to make an emergency lift; now he was nearly ready for the lift, he must not make it! First *le Général* Delivery tells him to come here, then *le Général* Larkin tells him to go there! Which general should he obey? Didn't American generals know what they were about? How then was a poor French skipper to know what he was to do?

As well as I could, I told him I was very sorry, and tried to get over to him that in Oran General Larkin considerably outranked General Delivery and had just countermanded the latter's orders; perhaps, even in France, the same thing sometimes happened?

That mollified the skipper; he'd seen plenty of such. With an expressive shrug of his shoulders and a philosophical,

"Oui, mon capitaine!" he turned to to unrig his derrick and prepare her for towing again. The lifting job was off indefinitely.

I got in the boat once more and went ashore. I would salvage what I could from the situation with General Larkin. On the quay, I told the major that when the crane was unrigged, she was all his and he could board her. The crane skipper had been told to take the major's orders from then on. I went back to the phone and called Larkin again, bitterly regretting that I didn't yet have the rear admiral's rank Cunningham was going to get for me against situations exactly like this one. Under those conditions, I'd outrank a brigadier general and we might discuss matters; as it was, he outranked me, and in his frame of mind, the discussion would no doubt be very one-sided. It was.

I got Larkin again. Had I ordered the stolen crane unhooked and turned back? I had. Well then, what else did I want? For himself, he saw no reason for further discussion; he was willing to forget my dereliction; the subject was closed.

For me it wasn't. I told him briefly why not; why we needed that crane. Couldn't I have it for just an hour's use when he'd finished with it?

The general couldn't see it. When he finished with it, it had to go back immediately where it came from. It couldn't be delayed

to help us. It seemed evident to me that from what he'd heard from his major, he was convinced I had myself deliberately stolen the crane and was lying to him when I said I personally knew nothing of it till afterwards, though I was, of course, responsible for what my men did. He seemed exceedingly disinterested in discussing anything with a liar and a thief. He had his crane back and was willing to let it go at that. Wasn't that enough?

I reflected. As a general, it was probable he didn't know how much even a moderate sized dry dock meant to all the wrecks needing docking in North Africa. But I did. I just couldn't let it go at that, no matter what happened to me personally. I kept at him. Finally I got a compromise. I suggested that I turn over to him immediately the crane I already had (and with which alone I could do nothing) so he could use both cranes to unload his General Sherman tanks and very much speed up that work. He agreed to let me have the use of his crane when that task was done before it went back west, for the lifting of the *Danaë*. The discussion ended.

I went back and told Bill Reed that not only was the crane he'd stolen being turned over to the army, but that in penance, we were turning the other cheek and surrendering ours also. His men would just have to loaf now a week or more, doing nothing, to make up for the thirty minutes or so the army's crane had been in our hands. After that, we'd get them both back briefly and he could finish the clearance of the *Danaë* and the lifting of the Moyen Dock. I couldn't wait in Oran for that; he could handle it. Next day I was going back to Algiers.

The sequel was unexpected. Reed and his men, with nothing whatever left to do save to watch those cranes, reported to me in Algiers that for four days after we had been caught red-handed with the stolen crane, neither crane lifted anything; they both just lay idle in Oran harbor. Whatever the reasons, whether other cargo had to be handled out first or for some other cause, not a tank was lifted out by either crane, though I have little doubt that the officious major who had caused us so much trouble by his rectitude, never bothered to inform General Larkin of *that*.

After a four-day idle spell, both cranes made short work of the General Sherman tanks. Then with both cranes back in his hands

for a few brief hours, Reed yanked the obnoxious *Danaë* off the Moyen Dock, and a few days later had the Moyen Dock itself, the last wreck of any military importance in Oran, floated up again.

At that, Reed and his whole salvage crew, all civilians, with their contract time in Africa well served out, packed their bags and went home. They'd had enough of Africa, whether in Massawa or Oran. All of them, except Reed who was too old, were going to ship in the navy, with the idea that when next they went diving, they'd be sent to a combat area where America had interest enough to furnish them the wherewithal, not where it made thieves of them to serve their country's needs.

As for me, nerves on edge, I went back to Algiers with an intolerable headache and the implications of General Larkin's acid tones still rankling in my breast, wishing to God that General Delivery had stayed at home in the postoffice of whatever town in California Buck Scougale came from.

C H A P T E R

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THE NIGHT I GOT BACK TO ALGIERS, January 28, 1943, there was no sleep for anyone, least of all for me who was cracking up for want of it. The most effective air raid yet staged on Algiers harbor hit us.

Whatever the cause, for the first time in my experience in many raids there, the bombers got over the harbor. One heavy bomb came crashing down on the forecastle of *S.S. Strasbourg*, already torpedoed, alongside which I had the *Salvestor* working under Commander Hewett, R.N.R. Fortunately for the *Strasbourg*, the bomb struck squarely atop her anchor windlass, a massive piece of machinery on the forecastle near the bow. There wasn't much left of that windlass after the explosion, but at least it saved the rest of the ship below from appreciable additional damage. However, the blast effects were terrible—the *Strasbourg*'s chief engineer was hurled against a bulkhead in his superstructure stateroom so violently it killed him. And on the *Salvestor*, tied alongside the *Strasbourg*'s bow, the only reason my salvage officer, Commander Hewett, wasn't similarly killed, was that on the line the blast sent him hurtling across his cabin, there was an open door. Through this he was flung to land on the deck outside so badly bruised and shaken I doubted he'd be worth much for some time, if ever.

Two other ships caught it also, both remarkably enough, also salvage jobs from previous torpedoes, on which we were already working. Neither was hit directly, but in one case, a bomb exploding close alongside, lifted that ship right up out of the water and set her down again with such a smack she ended with a bad corrugation in her heavy steel plating completely encircling her amid-

ships. In the other case, a bomb exploded squarely in line with the ship's stern but a little distance aft of it. The stern of that ship above water looked as if a titanic shotgun had been fired into it—it was riddled with hundreds of small shrapnel holes. But both ships stayed afloat, and as salvage jobs weren't too much worse off afterwards than before.

However, the Nazi bombers paid dearly for it. Off the far end of the harbor, the searchlights caught one bomber flying low, and it went down into the sea riddled with tracers from Oerlikons tracking it from all sides. Then we learned later that, thoroughly enraged by what had happened over Algiers, the night-fighters from every field eastward between us and Bône (including a new squadron just arrived at Didjelli) had risen to engage the returning bombers and had had a field day in the dark skies. The result was that more than half of all the bombers over Algiers that night were shot down on their way home. It was unlikely the Nazis would ever repeat that raid.

But shot-down bombers or not, the raid left me and my few men with plenty more to do. Wearily I went about it. In the midst of all that, I had word the Admiral of the Fleet wanted to see me. I left the harbor, went back to the St. George. What now?

It was enough in my then state of mind. Very glumly, Cunningham told me he had bad news for me. The day after my dinner at General Eisenhower's, Cunningham, thinking to seize a golden opportunity while he had our Chief of Naval Operations still in Algiers, had told Admiral King he and Eisenhower were going to recommend me for promotion to rear admiral; would King please see that the recommendation got a fair wind and speedy action when it got to Washington?

The result had been wholly unexpected. King had told him that so far as he was concerned, nothing would give him greater pleasure. But it just couldn't be done. No longer in the regular Navy, I was now a naval reserve officer. Congress, by law, had restricted the Naval Reserve to exactly one officer in the rank of rear admiral; there already was one, a much older officer than I, holding down a desk job in Washington. No more could legally be made.

Greatly distressed at such an unfair situation, Cunningham told

me he, of course, had to agree with King that it was useless to make the recommendation. Our Congress was as much beyond King's control as Parliament was beyond his own. Much as he, as well as Admiral King regretted it, I must remain a captain. As for himself, aside from all other aspects of this fiasco due to our strange laws, it was unfortunate to leave the command situation on future wrecks in quite undesirable shape. But there was nothing he could do about it.

I thanked the Admiral of the Fleet both for his goodwill and for his intentions; it certainly wasn't his fault nor General Eisenhower's. I would continue to do the best I could.

I said goodby and went back to my newly bombed wrecks in the harbor, very low in spirits. My own country had done next to nothing in helping out with materials or anything else the few men it had sent to fight its war on the sea in the Mediterranean. Why did Congress have to make a bad situation worse by discriminating against some officers because they were reserves, and forbid them rank enough to cope properly with the situations the war tossed them into? It wasn't so in the Army; it wasn't so in the Air Corps. Both had non-regulars by the dozens wearing the silver stars of brigadiers and major generals, and even of lieutenant generals; all needed them for the jobs they had. But apparently naval reserve officers were a completely different and inferior breed of cats; Congress didn't think enough of us to let us have rank equal to our war zone jobs. Under such conditions, no wonder anybody with a little more rank in any other service, kicked us around. I was still wincing under the latest set of black and blue marks I'd got myself. However, as well as I could I shrugged my shoulders, told myself "*C'est la guerre!*" and went back to Algiers harbor to board my wrecks, feeling somewhat as if a bomb had just exploded right under my stern also.

I was still busily engaged next day on those wrecks when in the afternoon, I got word from the Admiral of the Fleet's office there was trouble to the eastward. A very sketchy radio dispatch had come in indicating there had been a battle at sea off Bougie between a convoy bound east and Nazi torpedo planes. While they had succeeded in saving their accompanying merchant ships from any harm,

both of the warships protecting the convoy—the *Javelin* class destroyer *H.M.S. L 06*, and the anti-aircraft cruiser *H.M.S. Pozarica*—had been torpedoed and badly damaged. Both were trying to make Bougie; their safe arrival was uncertain; too little was known of their condition. What could be done to help?

I had no salvage forces at all in Bougie; no ship, no men. All I could do was to order the *Salvestor* to stand by to cast loose from the *Strasbourg* and steam for Bougie if she got further word. There was no use ordering her to start immediately; she couldn't possibly get clear and arrive for more than twenty-four hours yet; she would be much too late. There was only one other thing possible; to start overland for Bougie myself. It was about 110 miles away; in three hours I could get there.

So taking only Lieutenant Ankers with me (both of us hastily grabbing guns and very little else), I headed eastwards out of Algiers in my jeep. Meanwhile, Captain King, R.N., of Cunningham's staff, the Fleet Naval Constructor, started soon after us in another car.

Ankers drove all the way, nearly hiding the steering wheel with his huge paws. It was very cold in that open jeep with the wintry wind getting a free sweep at us. Long before we got to Bougie, Ankers' hands on the wheel, in spite of his gloves, were so frozen they were numb lumps of flesh. Jammed into what little space his massive frame left me of the front seat, I myself was frozen so stiff I could hardly move.

Even with the many truck convoys we had to pass, Ankers made Bougie in not much over two hours. We roared through the town to the waterfront just as dusk was falling, to haul up finally on the outer quay overlooking the Mediterranean.

Our reception in Bougie was disheartening. As we drew up in the semi-darkness on the stone quay, hoping to find some fast boat awaiting us on which we might get out to sea, a whole flotilla of miscellaneous small boats swung in alongside the quay and began to disgorge shipwrecked British seamen. There was the whole crew of *H.M.S. Pozarica* from captain on down, over four hundred men, scrambling up on the quay around us. Evidently the major ship we had come to save had sunk; engulfing our jeep was her whole ship's company bearing on their backs what little of their belongings,

mainly clothes, they had managed to escape with.

I spotted her captain; from his gold lace, a regular Royal Navy four-striper, as suited a cruiser command. With difficulty, I slid my numbed legs out of the jeep, went up to him, introduced myself. Obviously, his ship had foundered; but how about the *L 06*, that destroyer with him? Was she, at least, still afloat, so we could do anything for her?

I learned I had jumped to a wrong conclusion. Yes, the *L 06* was still afloat. But so also was his ship, the *Pozarica*, though she wouldn't be much longer. If it weren't so dark, I might perhaps still be able to see part of her forecastle some miles out in the bay where they'd finally abandoned her. With her stern wide open to the sea, she was on the point of capsizing or foundering or both; you couldn't tell which first. Her propeller shaft was bent and useless, her rudder and part of her fantail had been blown off by the torpedo which had hit her squarely astern; what was left of her aft was already fourteen feet under water; she had a terrific list to port, an ungodly trim by the stern, and was about to go down. He had finally ordered her abandoned; there he was with his whole crew except the casualties from the exploding torpedo. I needn't bother about his ship; she was beyond hope. And I needn't bother about the destroyer either; she didn't need any help. She'd been hit forward, leaving her machinery all intact; while badly damaged, she was still safely afloat and would remain so.

That sounded better. One sinking ship at a time was enough to keep Ankers and me busy. We could concentrate on the *Pozarica*. I peered out across the wide Bay of Bougie for a glimpse of her. But it was already too dark; I could make out nothing. I turned again to her commanding officer.

"Well, Captain," I said, "you pick out about thirty or forty of your ratings here that'll do the most good in saving her, and we'll start right back. We'll bring her in yet!"

On that quay in Bougie, my education was finally completed. Her captain wasn't going back to try to save his ship; neither was he ordering any of his crew back aboard. She was already a total loss; why bother with her further?

I had spotted hovering about on the fringe of the mob of ship-

less sailors, that Scotch lieutenant of Royal Engineers (together with a few of his khaki-clad enlisted men) who had taken such an interest in salvaging the half-sunken *Glenfinlas* when I had been in Bougie only the week before. I was sure I could rely on that British army lieutenant for the men I needed. His soldiers were at least all mechanics; he himself was a good engineer.

So I didn't argue with the *Pozarica*'s skipper; it was no use. He had four stripes; as many as I. I couldn't claim to be Senior Officer Present and order him to do anything; I didn't have rank enough to try it; I never should have. And there didn't seem to be any value in wasting what slight energy I had left in pleading with him; he had clearly enough stated his ideas.

I beckoned to the Royal Engineer lieutenant; he pushed his way through to me. Would he and his soldiers, two or three squads of them, go out to sea with me to try to save the abandoned cruiser *Pozarica* for the Royal Navy?

To my joy (I knew he'd do it), he said he would. He went even further, to tell me that in anticipation of help coming, he'd already started out a small flat barge with a sergeant and some of his soldiers on it and one of the only type of pump he had—a high pressure gasoline-driven fire pump. He had another such pump coming down to the quay very shortly; those pumps were intended only for fighting air raid fires in Bougie; they weren't high capacity low pressure salvage pumps, but they might be of some help on a ship. Anyway, those two were all the portable pumps of any kind in Bougie; would I look at the one soon to arrive and tell him whether it was worth sending out? The other one was just like it.

Here was a man! I forgot all about the *Pozarica*'s captain; I didn't need him any more. I turned to on that engineer lieutenant, instructing him to get as much suction hose for his two fire pumps as he could; we'd need it all, as well as his pumps, which while not suited to the job, were at least something.

But if I'd forgotten the skipper of the *Pozarica*, he hadn't forgotten me. Now that he saw I had some men to help, even though they were only unseagoing British soldiers, and that we were going out, he thrust his way through his own milling seamen to my side, to give me the most severe shock of my entire salvage career. He

tried to persuade me *not* to go out to try to save his sinking ship!

Now I had seen everything in salvage. Never again could I have a new experience, unless it should be my ill-luck to go down trapped inside a foundering ship myself—as soon seemed likely from the arguments of the *Pozarica's* captain.

But if I couldn't order that captain to do anything, no more was he in any position to give me any orders. He couldn't keep me off the *Pozarica*; she wasn't his any more; he'd abandoned her. I turned away to continue my instructions to the army lieutenant and some of his sergeants. We had to wait a bit for the second fire pump and the additional suction hose to arrive. We got a bite to eat while we waited, and a drink to thaw Ankers and me out.

While we waited, we acquired some new recruits. A Royal Navy lieutenant (interestingly enough, a *reserve* lieutenant), pushed up to tell me he was one of the junior engineers on the *Pozarica*; he and some half dozen of his enlisted engineering ratings wanted to go back with me to help save their ship; they knew her and could be useful; would I take them with me?

I would; neither I nor they put whatever nautical nuances might be involved in that proceeding, up to their skipper. If they or I ever got court-martialed for it, the court would have to decide on the ethics of our action. I wasn't bothering; neither were they.

Shortly, jammed in amongst her deck torpedo tubes, we shoved off in the darkness on a British MTB carrying the second fire pump on its rubber-tired carriage, about a dozen soldiers, the few men belonging to the *Pozarica* and their lieutenant, Ankers, the Scotch lieutenant, and myself. Our pockets were bulging with all the flash-lights we could scavenge around Bougie—we'd need them inside the pitch-black hull of the dying *Pozarica*, a strange ship to most of us.

The sub-lieutenant commanding the MTB gave her the gun once he was clear of the quay. We roared out through the harbor defense nets into the wide Bay of Bougie, practically the open sea. Even in the darkness, the speedy MTB made short work of the few miles to sea where the abandoned cruiser lay. On our way, we passed the destroyer *L 06* not far off, anchored by her stern now somewhat closer to shore but well outside the harbor. She was, of course, wholly blacked out.

I could vaguely make out her profile as we shot by her in the night—there was only half a destroyer there; the stern half. From her bridge forward, she just didn't exist any more. No torpedo alone could have done that; her forward magazine must have exploded also and blown her bow half to bits. But so far as I could judge, the rest of her was on an even keel at about normal draft. Her watertight bulkheads beneath her bridge must still be intact; there was no indication that she was making any water aft. It was remarkable, but what I'd been told seemed true. I didn't need to bother about her; she was evidently safely afloat and would stay so. The *Pozarica* would be our only problem; she would be enough.

The MTB raced on by the amputated *L 06*, then began to swerve sharply in the darkness, first to starboard, then to port, heeling crazily each time as she swung. Her skipper was evidently dodging the protruding masts of the numerous troopships bombed and sunk earlier off Bougie; I couldn't see them till each in succession flitted by us in the night but he knew where they were. The Bay of Bougie was already a considerable graveyard for British ships. I reflected grimly that the *Pozarica*'s skipper had brought her to an appropriate enough spot in which to bury her; she would, so far as he was concerned, have much company there on the ocean floor.

Very soon we made out the shadow which was the waterlogged hulk of the anti-aircraft light cruiser *H.M.S. Pozarica*, with the deserted guns of her two forward turrets still pointing futilely skyward. The MTB slowly circled her so that I might look her over. In the darkness, I could see but little, but that little was enough. We should have the tiger by the tail if we boarded the *Pozarica* now. If we did, and ever saw Bougie again, with or without that cruiser, it would be more luck than we had any right to expect.

She was lying with even the heavy gun atop her after deckhouse completely submerged and the sea already lapping up against her midships superstructure. Her quarterdeck had wholly vanished beneath the waves; her after end must be entirely flooded. She had an ominous trim by the stern; so much so, it seemed any minute she was about to slide stern first into the sea and disappear altogether. So heavily was she trimmed down aft, her stem had been lifted

wholly out of water, exposing her forefoot and a good part of her keel forward.

To top off all, she had a hellish list to port; her tripod masts and her stack were leaning far over. It was evident that between that list and her trim, keeping any footing at all on her tilted decks would be a problem even for a monkey. Why in that condition she still remained afloat was a puzzle. I judged her after engine room bulkhead must still be holding against the sea, giving her buoyancy enough amidships and forward to keep her afloat and relatively still right side up. How long that bulkhead might continue to do so was anybody's guess; if it let go, she'd go down like a rock.

All in all, the abandoned *Pozarica*, inert, dark as a tomb, awash, fearfully heeled over, with an alarming trim aft, was an awesome sight to look upon, a frightening object to dream of boarding. As I first saw her, shrouded in darkness, engulfed in the blackness of the night, seemingly about to be swallowed up by the inky sea already washing over her aft, she was an even more terrifying ship to board than the blazing *Strathallan*. There at least the roaring flames gave an illusion of life and more light than we ever had any need for; here on the careened *Pozarica* all seemed only cold death and ghastly darkness waiting us.

We boarded the *Pozarica*, climbing up one of the scramble nets draped down her starboard side. I told the MTB skipper to hang on there for further orders. A little aft of where we came alongside was the float sent out before, practically fair with the ship's gunwale at the awash deck. I asked the Scotch lieutenant to start heaving his two fire pumps up on deck and as far aft as he still had any deck left to stand them on; he wouldn't have much of a lift in doing it nor far to go. While he was busy on that, Ankers, the *Pozarica*'s engineer lieutenant, and I, would survey her inside and below and see what she needed.

With our flashlights boring holes in the ebony blackness, the three of us, led by the Royal Navy man who knew the ship, threaded our way over the cockbilled decks inside the midships superstructure, then down a deck, then inboard to the bulkhead door leading below to her engine room. I shined my light inside there, peered down on a mass of tilted gratings, drunkenly inclined ladders, and

grotesquely heeled over machinery.

Followed by Ankers and the other lieutenant, I started down the narrow steel ladder into the black cavern below, clinging with one hand to a precarious hold on the oily ladder, with the other swinging my torch all about. The after bulkhead was squirting stinging jets of water at us; the ship must be completely flooded on the other side of that bulkhead. Down three flights of steel ladders I went; a fearful climbing job. Those steep and slippery engine room ladders with all their winding turns would have been bad enough with the ship in normal trim and fully illuminated; as she was, it was a feat for an acrobat to get down them with an unbroken neck.

By the time I got near the floor plate gratings, I knew where I was at with the *Pozarica*. That after engine room bulkhead was all that was keeping her afloat; she was solidly flooded aft of it all the way to its top; those high pressure leaks all over it proved that. So long as that bulkhead held, she wouldn't sink, except gradually.

But she was surely going to capsize long before she was ready to sink bodily unless something was done swiftly. For aside from all the fine leaks, there was a continuous flow of water entering the lower engine room around the propeller shaft where it passed through the after bulkhead, and even more water was streaming steadily in around the bulging watertight door to the flooded shaft alley. That low down near her keel, the weight of the sea pressing from way above the submerged quarterdeck, was too much for both watertight door and shaft stuffing box—they'd never been built to hold any pressure like that, and they weren't holding against it. I took a second look at that bulging shaft alley door; it was the weakest spot on the bulkhead. If it let go, God help us! But nothing could be done about it just then, except to ignore it and hope it might hold till we could get around to shoring it.

The incoming water had already flooded her up to the lower engine room gratings and was steadily rising, all running to port, of course, where it was constantly increasing her heel. How much more of that could she stand before she suddenly rolled over on us? Who knew?

I swung my light around in the utter blackness, scanning the rising water to port, the leaks aft, the dead machinery all about me.

She was a diesel-driven ship—no steam, no boilers. All the way over to port against her heeled-down side, I could see a small room, door open, housing an auxiliary diesel-driven electric generator. The water had already flooded through the door into that room; the generator was useless.

But to starboard, the high side of the ship, the thin shaft of light from my torch showed a similar room and a similar diesel-driven generator. The water hadn't risen high enough yet on that side to flood in there, but it would before too long. If we could start that diesel, we could get power enough to give us light all over the ship; an inestimable boon for working. And if I could get a pump going down in that engine room to get rid of the water already there and also what was coming in, preferably before it flooded out the starboard generator also, we could save her from capsizing on us.

And if I could do that, it would give us time to empty at least some submerged compartments aft and keep her from sinking. And we'd save her.

But first, some light. I turned to the *Pozarica*'s junior engineer beside me. Could he and his seamen start that starboard diesel generator, throw in the proper circuits, and light up the ship amidships and forward, so we could work? And dispel the soul-chilling darkness in which we were shrouded?

He could. He and they promptly did, too. In a few minutes, that starboard diesel was throbbing, electric lights flashed on all about us, the dying *Pozarica* seemed not quite so nearly dead. From up on deck, we heard a cheer. Things began to look a little hopeful. At least, if now we died far down inside the *Pozarica*, it wouldn't be in darkness. There was some comfort in that.

Now to get rid of the water in the engine room which shortly would be the death of her unless ejected. Could we start a ship's pump next, I asked her lieutenant? We couldn't; her pumps were all flooded out there beneath our feet and useless, every one of them.

Well, there still were those two portable army fire pumps up on deck. Could they do the job, I wondered? I glanced upward. It was certain they couldn't. The engine room was so deep from the floor

plates to the entrance door far above us, that no pump set on the deck outside that door could possibly suck water up that high; the laws of Nature just wouldn't permit it. And as for getting one of those fire pumps down into the engine room close enough to the water where it *could* pick up a suction and then push the water up and overboard, that was impossible also.

My heart sank as I realized that both of those gasoline-driven army fire pumps were so bulky, even if we took the wheels off their carriages, that they could not possibly be squeezed through the narrow door in the steel bulkhead into the upper engine room, let alone ever be got far enough down those steep ladders so they could suck. Those pumps were built for use in the wide outdoors where there was plenty of elbow room; not for inside the close confines of any ship. If they were set on deck and used on some of the flooded after compartments, they might perhaps save her from sinking immediately.

Still, what good would it do us to save her from sinking now or later, if she capsized on us meanwhile, as assuredly she would before long if we couldn't cope with the water rising in the engine room and heeling her farther and farther over? It all seemed hopeless; every man of us, sailor or soldier alike aboard the *Pozarica*, was risking his life for no gain. It began to look as if her skipper were right in washing his hands of her.

I racked my fuddled brains for an answer. There must be one; my experience in salvage had taught me there always was some way out, unconventional though it might seem. All that was necessary usually to find the answer was a little imagination and no inhibitions.

The answer came to me. The answer was the *L 06*, that near by shattered warship I'd passed not long before on my way out from Bougie. The *L 06* was a British destroyer, even though she was now only the after half of one. And British destroyers, as I'd learned on the *Porcupine*, all carried a beautifully compact portable electrically driven centrifugal pump! And there to starboard of me on the *Pozarica* was the electricity—that is, it was there provided I could get a pump down and going before the water rose high enough to flood that generator also. All I needed now was the elec-

tric pump—fast! The *L 06*, blasted in half herself, was going to furnish the wherewithal to save her sorely stricken big sister—if only I could move fast enough.

Telling Ankers to do what he could aft with the Royal Engineers' fire pumps while I was gone, I went flying up those dizzying, greasy ladders out of the engine room, raced out on deck. I grabbed six of the nearest soldiers, ordered them to follow me, shot down the scramble net to the MTB alongside. There was no time to waste.

"The *L 06*, four bells!" I gasped, completely out of breath from climbing. "Shake a leg!"

The MTB skipper was a good lad. We were underway in no time, threading a path again in the night amongst other wrecks. In a few minutes we were alongside the after half of the *L 06*. She was absolutely black and silent. I couldn't see a soul on her deck anywhere.

However, not bothering about that, I leaped aboard her stern from the MTB, telling the soldiers to wait where they were. I went up her deck, peering with my torch into her after deckhouse. I found inside a very sleepy quartermaster, the only man not turned in on that wreck. Where, I asked of him, was the Officer of the Deck?

It appeared that he was it; all hands (those yet alive, that is) were thoroughly knocked out from what they'd been through. The captain'd given everybody permission to turn in. That was all right with me; all I wanted of the quartermaster was first a little information, then maybe to be led to the captain. As for the information; had they had a portable electric pump on the *L 06* and where had they kept it stowed?

They had, and thank God, they'd always kept it stowed amidships! It was on the part of the *L 06* which was still there.

That was fine, I said; now take me to the captain. He did. We found the captain dead to the world, stowed away in a cabin still intact under what was left of his bridge. With very great difficulty, we managed to get the captain half awake. I told him what I wanted; why I needed it; could I have it?

I doubt if the skipper half realized what was being asked of him; he was too far gone in utter exhaustion. Without even rolling over

to face me, he mumbled I could have anything I wanted on the ship so long as it didn't involve turning out any of his crew to get it, and for the love of God, not to bother him again—nor his men either.

That was still all right with me; I'd brought my own crew. I certainly sympathized with his desires—no one, even in the darkness, could look at the forlorn remnant of his destroyer and not heartily agree with him.

I ran aft for my six soldiers. In a few minutes they were struggling to get that heavy cylindrical pump down out of the midships skids where it was stowed, and aft aboard our MTB. It took all six of them to lug it.

Meanwhile the quartermaster was helping me with the special electric cable for it and with the special hoses, without which it would be useless. I demurred over the hoses—there wasn't enough; only one short length of suction hose and one fifty-foot length of discharge hose. We had nothing on the *Pozarica* which would fit that very special pump. Didn't the *L 06* have any more hose for their pump?

The quartermaster assured me that was all there was; there had been more once, but no longer; what I saw was the whole story. I had to be content with that. In another few minutes our MTB was plunging through the night again, threading its way back to the *Pozarica*.

By now I had a slight knowledge of the inside layout of our cruiser, but the knowledge gave me little comfort. Six husky soldiers, three on each side of that pump, had had trouble enough luggering it along the level open deck of the *L 06*. On the *Pozarica* there were no level wide decks; we should have to lug that pump aft along a very narrow lower deck passage where there wasn't room for men to walk abreast and where the decks had a crazy rake that made you seasick just to try to walk on them. And then those terrible ladders down into the lower engine room, on which a man could hardly hold himself, let alone help manhandle down over a quarter of a ton of pump!

We had a pump, all right, small enough to go through the engine room door. But how were we ever going to get it to that door in

time, to say nothing of getting it below afterwards where it might do some good? It was a labor to baffle Hercules himself. How I was going to get that pump below in time, I couldn't figure out.

We ran the MTB this time in alongside the heeled-down side of the *Pozarica*, her low port side. There at a spot where the height of the MTB's deck just matched the gunwale of the cruiser, we skidded the heavy pump across onto the cruiser's deck; that wasn't too bad. Nor did we have too much difficulty till we had the pump down inside her on the lower deck passageway and started aft. Then trouble hit us with a vengeance.

I watched gloomily as first with soldiers alone, then with sailors substituted for some of them, the straining men struggled to get aft with the pump. Time was running out on me; the list on the *Pozarica* was decidedly worse than when I'd left her to get the pump. The men just couldn't do it; there wasn't room in that narrow passage to get alongside the pump and take a grip on it. When they changed their tactics, using three men at each end instead of any alongside, the men at the front end of the pump were unable all at the same time to keep a grip on the pump, walk backwards, and hold any footing on the inclined deck—they fell all over each other. The pump crashed to the deck.

I sent a sailor up on the topside to see if he could find a block and tackle anywhere on that deserted wreck; perhaps we'd have better luck trying to drag the pump with the line, and later we'd need the block and tackle anyway to lower the pump below. But the sailor was dubious; after all, he was in the engineer force, not a seaman. Where the lines might be kept on the ship, he didn't know; neither did any of his mates. But he'd try to find one. He left.

I started almost to sweat blood. Every second counted now. I urged the men left to try again. They did; the results were terrible; there just wasn't room enough to work for all the men it took to lift the front end of that pump.

Ankers was behind me in the passage. As well as I, he knew the need for haste. He did something about it.

"Get the hell out of the way!" he ordered the three sailors struggling a third time at the front end of the pump to get a grip on it. "Let me at that pump!"

Before they even realized what it was he wanted, he sent them all flying down the passage clear of the pump end, seized it himself, lifted it clear of the deck! I gazed at him, awestruck. Over an eighth of a ton at least on that end, and he was holding it all alone. Here *was* Hercules himself going into action to save the *Pozarica*. Thank God, I had brought a giant along with me!

"Come on now, men!" he sang out to the three British soldiers, all huskies, holding up the other end of that pump. "Let's get cracking!"

They got underway, Ankers going backwards, the other three forward. In very little time, the pump moved a hundred feet aft along that cramped passage, came opposite the door leading below to the engine room. They set the pump down again.

Inside the door were those impossible ladders. Now we'd have to wait for the block and tackle. Even with that, it would be very dubious. But there was no other way. I looked at the sickening angle of the bulkheads. Would that sailor never get back to us with the lowering tackle? Or had he finally decided it was more prudent, now that he was there, to stay up on the topside where he had a chance at least? The seconds dragged away.

Ankers lost patience.

"To hell with the blocks, Captain! We can get it down without them. Come on, lads!" He picked up his end of the pump again, the soldiers obediently picked up theirs, he went backwards through the engine room door to the head of the topmost ladder, set the pump down, went a few rungs down the ladder, gripped the pump once more.

"For God's sake, don't try that, George!" I sang out to him. "You'll get killed, sure!"

But George Ankers said nothing. Perhaps he felt he might as well get killed while doing something as while doing nothing; I never knew. He merely clenched his teeth, took a firmer grip on the lower end of the pump, motioned with his head to the soldiers above to lower it away to him.

The next few minutes were the most agonizing of my life as I watched that pump going down those crazy ladders, almost wholly supported from below by Lieutenant Ankers, with the three strain-

ing soldiers above, their neck muscles standing out like flutes on a column, clinging grimly to their end lest the pump weight they were supporting get away from them to knock clear and to crush the man perilously balancing himself on the ladder beneath.

First down one ladder, then down the second, finally down the third, went that pump. How Ankers ever managed it on those terrifying engine room ladders without smashing the pump, let alone himself, I don't know yet. But he did.

And hardly had he finally landed the pump safely just clear of the water lapping over the lower gratings, than he was bending over it, feverishly starting to couple up the suction hose while I coupled on the discharge hose and the *Pozarica*'s lieutenant, together with one of his men who was an electrician, began to couple up the special electric cable to drive it. In another minute the pump was running, sucking up water hardly a few inches away from it. And none too soon either. The water had risen almost to the doorsill of the room housing that starboard generator on whose continued running everything depended.

But I swiftly discovered we weren't out of the woods yet. We were pumping out water, all right, but to no purpose save to make matters worse. The soldier on the top grating who had had orders to run the other end of the discharge hose up on deck and overboard, shouted down to me,

"The bloody hose ain't long enough, Captain! It won't reach the open deck! Y're only flooding the passage up here!"

That was bad. Free water high up in a ship is even more dangerous to her stability than the same water low down in her bilges; it helps to make her topheavy and more likely to capsize. And the *Pozarica* needed very little encouragement in that.

I scrambled up to the ladders to cure the situation. If the hose (of which I could get only one length from the *L 06*) wasn't long enough to get up on deck with the water we were pumping, I'd open a lower deck airport near by and shove the end of the hose out that.

But I found I couldn't. There weren't any airports. The side of the *Pozarica* was armored all the way up to her main deck; there wasn't a single airport in her side, near or far! And already I was

standing in that lower deck passageway in deepening water that we were pumping up from below! Now we *were* up against it!

In a frenzy, I rushed up a hatchway to the main deck lest I be too late. There a little aft of me in the open were those two army fire pumps, sucking away through an after hatch on some compartment just below where Ankers had placed them. Near by on deck was that Royal Engineer lieutenant.

"Quick, Lieutenant!" I ordered. "Get one of your pumps up here!" I indicated the hatch through which I'd just come.

The lieutenant, his sergeant, a few soldiers, all seized the pump, still running, yanked up its suction hose, rolled the pump up the steeply sloping deck to the new location (not too hard a task since it was on wheels). Then they dropped its suction hose down to the deck below into the lake of water there coming up from the engine room. In a moment, it had caught suction and was picking that water up out of the passageway to push it overboard in fine style. We were using two pumps in tandem to do the job of one, but thank God, we had the two pumps!

I wiped my sweating brow, sagged back against the carriage of that fire pump. Now the situation was at last in hand; the *Pozarica* wasn't going to get a chance to capsize on us. We could finally proceed in some order to keep her from sinking. The worst was over. I looked at my watch. It wasn't so late; we'd hardly been aboard her an hour yet. But I felt as if I'd lived nearly a whole lifetime in that hour.

We slaved all the rest of that night, all the next day, all the second night, and well into the third day on the *Pozarica*. We saved her.

When the third day dawned at last on a completely bleary-eyed, gaunt, and utterly worn out little company of soldiers and sailors on the *Pozarica*, she was no longer in danger. All her list was gone; she stood erect, heeled neither to starboard nor to port; she would never capsize. And we had emptied enough of her flooded stern compartments so that we had brought her after gun and part of her after deckhouse above the sea and reduced her trim sufficiently to put her bow once more into the water and make her keel in-

visible. She was safe from sinking.

Her deck aft was still under water; she still had such a trim by the stern as to cause any seaman looking at her to open his eyes wide in astonishment; but she was safe. Ninety-eight per cent of *H.M.S. Pozarica* was intact, undamaged, and wanting only dry docking to get rid of the remaining water aft and the rebuilding of her rudder, her propeller shaft, and a bit of her fantail to make a fighting ship of her again.

With the cruiser in that condition, her captain who had helped us not at all to save His Majesty's Ship *Pozarica*, came back (with most of the rest of his crew; a few had drifted back sooner) to take command again of his vessel. As I had no authority to deny it to him, he took command.

Early in the afternoon, under his command and once again wholly manned by her own crew, the *Pozarica* started in tow the last few miles into Bougie harbor. I rode as a passenger, but I soon wished I hadn't. Going through the wide gate between the harbor nets, her skipper managed to keep too close to the starboard side of the channel, tangled his bent propeller shaft in the nets there, and went into the harbor dragging with him half the net defenses of Bougie.

I was too far gone myself to help him any further. The British salvage ship *Salvestor*, which I had sent for, had just that day arrived from Algiers. Wearily I got hold of Commander Hewett, R.N.R., her salvage officer. I told him to take over with his divers the task of cutting away with underwater torches or with wire cutters the steel wire anti-submarine nets in which the *Pozarica*'s skipper had succeeded in enmeshing himself, so the ship could be towed to Algiers for docking and repairs. Hewett took over. I went ashore.

There was little more for me in Bougie. I personally thanked the lieutenant of Royal Engineers and every one of his soldiers for what they had done for their country and for their Allies. It is a keen regret to me I have no record of that young Scotch engineer lieutenant's name—he was an honor to the Royal Engineers, to Britain, and to his comrades in arms, of whom I felt proud to count myself one. He was a man.

Lieutenant George Ankers, as soon as I was able, I should recommend for a Navy Cross. No man in action had better earned one. But I doubted that, in spite of my most earnest recommendation, he'd ever actually get it. There had been no banners flying, no bugles blowing, nothing at all of the glory of war about the setting, nothing at all but danger when Ankers had taken his life in his hands far down inside that sinking ship to save the torpedoed *Pozarica*. Not one man in thousands would have had the strength and skill to do it; not one in millions would also have had the courage to dare it. But it was only salvage; in Washington that wouldn't seem worth a major decoration.

I ordered Ankers to stay in Bougie, and when he had recuperated sufficiently, to take over the salvage of the half-sunken *Glenfinlas*, aided by the local Royal Engineers. I left him my jeep, as the only help I could give him. I may add that between him and that Scotch lieutenant, the *Glenfinlas*' bow was shortly floated on a bubble of air and she went westward for dry docking.

As for myself, I crawled into Captain King's car when I left the *Pozarica*, and behind his chauffeur, the two of us were shortly on our way back over the road to Algiers, to report to the Admiral of the Fleet that *H.M.S. Pozarica* had been saved, no thanks to her captain. The Fleet Naval Constructor for the Royal Navy, who was my companion on the ride back, had arrived in Bougie shortly after me, just in time to witness the scene there when the *Pozarica*'s skipper had endeavored to persuade me not to go out to his abandoned ship. Captain King had seen most of what had gone on afterwards. He told me he was going to recommend to the Naval Commander-in-Chief that the *Pozarica*'s captain be tried by court-martial.

I hardly heard him. In my condition, I cared no longer what happened to that skipper, to me, to anybody.

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WE GOT TO ALGIERS. I LEFT ALL the reporting to Captain King. I went straight to my quarters and sprawled out on the bed. I needed a rest.

But I didn't get it. I couldn't sleep, not then, not that night, not the next day. The *Pozarica* had been one wreck too many. Now all that ran in a jumble through my dazed mind, driving me wild for want of sleep, were wrecks. All kinds of wrecks—wrecks about to break in two, obstinate wrecks that wouldn't come off the beach, wrecks wrapped in flames with ghostly guns firing from them, sabotaged wrecks that wouldn't come up, wrecks torn wide open in collision, wrecks torpedoed and on the verge of sinking, teetering wrecks about to capsize, wrecks in port, wrecks at sea with U-boats skulking about, angling for a finishing shot. I struggled subconsciously with all of them as my worn out body tossed on the mattress, while consciously I tried to put them all out of my mind so I could get some desperately needed sleep.

It was no use; I couldn't sleep.

The second day, I went to the sickbay to be given something so I might obtain a little rest. The army surgeon there took a look at me, promptly put me on the sicklist and off duty, and carted me over to deposit me as a patient in the Algiers army hospital. There they stowed me away in bed, gave me something so I might sleep, and then spent the next four days going over me—all sorts of army surgeons and all sorts of tests, concluding with a special examination by the senior surgeon himself of General Eisenhower's staff.

The net result was that on February 8, the colonel commanding the hospital reported to General Eisenhower:

"It is our opinion that the condition is the result of excessive strain upon the heart . . . and in view of the possibility of complete cardiac failure, we advise that the patient have absolute rest of from four to five weeks completely away from the theater of operations."

I looked at the copy of that report furnished me. That "complete cardiac failure" caught my eye; what did that mean in plain English? To me it indicated that he meant I might suddenly fall dead. I doubted it; I didn't feel that bad; if only I could get a real rest, I'd be all right again.

A little later, with that report in his hands, General Eisenhower sent for me. They let me up out of bed; I went to his office; the Admiral of the Fleet was also there.

Both Eisenhower and Cunningham agreed with the surgeon that I needed the absolute rest and was entitled to it. Where did I prefer to be sent—to Marrakech in Morocco where there was an army hospital fairly well out of the war zone, or home to the Naval Hospital at Bethesda near Washington? It was completely a rhetorical question; they knew the answer even before I could get a word out of my mouth.

General Eisenhower considered the question further. Evidently he had the future of my naval career at heart. He didn't want to do anything that might affect it adversely. He said it would be advisable to send me home a hospital case; that wouldn't look good. It would be better if I were merely detached, duty completed. He'd get Washington unofficially immediately so it would be all right; I could go home simply as detached; in Washington I'd be hospitalized on arrival. If, for the record, I'd request a change of duty, he'd handle everything else. Cunningham agreed that that was best.

I went back to the Algiers hospital and wrote out a request for a transfer. After that, things moved with amazing rapidity. The Admiral of the Fleet forwarded it with a letter of his own:

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, ALLIED FORCE.

1. I forward herewith, with the liveliest regret, the application of Captain E. Ellsberg, U.S.N.R., to be relieved of his duties as Principal Salvage Officer in the Torch area.

2. Captain Ellsberg has performed immeasurable service in the last 15 months, both during his performance in salvage in the Massawa area and in the last months in the Torch area, where I have had the opportunity of seeing his work at first hand. Not only has the work itself been of the highest order, but it has been accompanied by a display of great energy and consistent courage; the latter most noticeably in the attempt to save the burning S.S. *Strathallan*.

3. In face of this record I feel that Captain Ellsberg has a right to a change of appointment if he so desires and I feel that I must not stand in his way, however much I regret his loss. I trust that he will be given an appointment in keeping with his fine record.

4. If, however, Captain Ellsberg finds that his need is primarily a rest from his recent arduous duty, I should welcome his return to this station at any time and the sooner the better. Matters may for the moment be on a more routine basis as regards salvage, but that state of affairs is unlikely to continue and we shall badly need the services of so outstanding a salvage expert, if his services can possibly be spared.

A. B. CUNNINGHAM
Admiral of the Fleet.

General Eisenhower acted at once. Before that afternoon was out, there was laid on my hospital bed a letter from him:

ALLIED FORCE HEADQUARTERS
Office of the Commander-in-Chief

8 February, 1943.

MY DEAR CAPTAIN ELLSBERG:

It is with the greatest regret I approve your request that you be relieved from your duties as Principal Salvage Officer of the North African Theater of Operations, but I concur with Admiral Cunningham that the immeasurable service you have rendered in the past fifteen months entitles you to a change in assignment when you request it.

Your work here has been crowned with outstanding success and speaks for itself as a job well done, from which you must derive great satisfaction. Through your untiring efforts the ports of North Africa, which are so essential to our efforts here, have been cleared, and numerous ships have been salvaged.

On the eve of your departure may I offer you my personal thanks for your outstanding efforts and wish the utmost success in your new assignment.

Sincerely,

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER.

Sitting up in bed, scanning those letters from the Admiral of the Fleet and from the Allied Commander-in-Chief, I felt almost as if I'd received a stiff shot of adrenalin; well enough, in fact, to tackle immediately another torpedoed wreck.

But I wasn't going to have a chance to try that—there accompanying Eisenhower's letter were the orders detaching me from Torch and the flight schedule made out for me by the Army Air Transport Service for my return, starting from Algiers next morning.

I examined that flight schedule. My eyes lighted up. Last New Year's Day, I had been on my way back by air from Casablanca to Oran. Recalling at that time that on the previous holidays, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, I had been also in the air kiting about Africa, I had wondered vaguely where the next holiday, Lincoln's Birthday, would find me bound. Now I knew.

On February 12, Lincoln's Birthday, I should be in the air over the South Atlantic, with all Africa far behind me, bound home!

THE END

H I S T O R I C A L N O T E

THIS IS THE STORY, MOSTLY ON THE sea, of a few men fighting with no arms in their hands and with very little of anything else, to help keep the first front in the European war a front. It is the story of the war at sea, under the sea, and in harbor to open and to keep open the way for the bridge of ships without which there could be no front.

This is that story as seen through the eyes of the Principal Salvage Officer for General Eisenhower in North Africa. It is set down from memory mostly, because the author, along with hundreds of thousands of other cogs in the machine, was prohibited from keeping any diary, lest it fall into the hands of the enemy if he were captured.

The author does not presume to believe that he has made no errors, though he believes they are few, as most of the events set down are thoroughly burned into his memory. Nor does he believe that some of the happenings described may not to a few others have seemed different; their point of view was not his. He can only remember them as one of a little group of men, mostly British and American, struggling in desperation to make bricks without straw that the invasion edifice might have a more solid foundation, or indeed, any foundation at all.

No pretense is made that the conversations as put down are verbatim; there were no stenographers about on torpedoed and bombed ships nor on scuttled wrecks, to take them down. He has attempted to set them down in such manner as most faithfully reflects the gist of what was said. Here and there, particularly ashore, in a few minor instances a remark attributed to one man may actually have been made by another.

The names are those of the actual participants; the identity of no one has been masked under a fictitious name. When no name is

used, it is because the actual name was either never clearly known or in the intervening years has faded out in the rush of events of the later war campaigns. To a few individuals who must therefore here remain nameless, the author owes an apology.

The names of ships are all actual, with one exception. Of the name of the French vessel designated as the *Ardois*, the author now has no record. For convenience, he has in this account called her the *Ardois*; he trusts that no delver into Lloyd's Register will bother to write him that no such French vessel existed, least of all in Oran.

For those who may be interested in the subsequent history of the *U.S.S. Thomas Stone*, which the author under compulsion of military surgeons was forced to leave behind him still stranded on the beach outside Algiers harbor, it is here related. After his departure from Africa and the detachment of her devoted and heroic captain, an attempt was made by others who then took over to drag the *Thomas Stone* off the beach without awaiting the arrival from the United States of the pontoons promised. As a result, still resting far too heavily on the bottom for safety, she was dragged across a ridge of rock and her back was broken, leaving her only junk. She was later sold as she then lay, to be broken up by the French as scrap iron.

The reactions under stress of a few figures of varied nationalities in this narrative and the conditions imposed on some others, were not wholly in promotion of the war effort. As this account is history and not fiction, it has seemed best to set them down nevertheless as the author witnessed them, that those at home may better realize what went on, and what, if anything, may be done in the future to improve conditions on the war front for the great majority striving their utmost to do the job their countries may toss again into their feeble arms.

EDWARD ELLSBERG.

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